

What is the impact of negative media coverage on social workers?

- Sharmeen Ziauddin: Hello. You're listening to the Social Work Community podcast by Community Care. This podcast is where social workers come to discuss the key issues affecting their profession. Whether you're a student or an experienced social worker, whether you're frontline or management, this podcast is for you. You will hear direct from social workers in your community about their successes and their challenges. Join the conversation and be part of our social work community.
- I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, assistant careers editor here at Community Care. Now, this episode is a special one because it's tied to our campaign, *Choose Social Work*. The main purposes of the campaign are to champion the profession by sharing inspiring stories. We also want to show the damage that negative media coverage can have on social workers, and to explore the potential solution, and that's what we're here to do in this episode, *What is the impact of negative media coverage on social workers?*
- To talk about this with me is Alisdair Kennedy, AKA the sociable social worker, and Becky Salter. Alisdair is an interim head of service for corporate parenting with a focus on fostering, adoption, residential and children who are in care, and has worked in social care for a whopping 30 years.
- Becky became a social worker a few years ago after retraining as a mature student. Currently in a children with disabilities team, she's worked in child protection, and prior to becoming qualified she worked in a residential children's home. She's also been a foster carer.
- Hi. It's so great to have you both on. How are you both? [0:01:38.2]
- Becky Salter: Morning. Feeling good.
- Alisdair Kennedy: Morning. Yeah, good, thank you. Yeah.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: Great. So, let's get straight into it. Over the years we've sadly seen a number of children dying at the hands of their parents or guardians. There's understandable a lot of media coverage and interest for certain cases. One particular headline in a tabloid from last year was, with a collage of lots of children, was 'The faces of innocent kids killed by the parents and the authorities who turned a blind eye to their suffering.' It included many children, as they went back 50 years, and of course the more recent children, such as Star Hobson, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, Peter Connolly (or Baby P, as he was referred to at the time). How have these tragic, high-profile cases affected you, specifically when the papers mention that the families were on the radar of social services? [0:02:30.5]

Becky Salter:

I think for me, given that I, you know, have been in the role for a couple of years now and came into this later, it's having more of an effect in that it sort of makes me want to not read it because when you're doing the job and you're very involved in the job and you know what an amazing job and how hard a lot of social workers are working in that arena, you instantly kind of think that is probably just a small proportion of the truth or the work that they were actually doing. And so it makes you kind of not want to read it.

I think because it can be more damaging. We talk a lot about self-care in social work and I think sometimes self-care in social work is trying not to get too embroiled in other people's, you know, situations, other people's cases, you know, and that is part of it, really, and that you've got to remain focused on your own job and it's a very difficult job. And sometimes you have to just leave that job at the front door without becoming completely uneducated and not being completely aware of what's going on in the world. But there is that part of it for me, just going...you know, my first kind of thought goes to the social worker and the team involved, thinking, 'God, I'm sure they did all of this.' And you feel quite despondent. And then I kind of have to really think about, 'Do I really want to read into this?' and have to think about myself and whether I'll carry on thinking about that, you know, for the next few nights or days or whatever. So...

Alisdair Kennedy:

Yeah. I mean, you said you were asking about, 'Does it have an effect on you?' I mean, I think any scrutiny of local authority or any teams that we work in, it affects team morale. And I think all staff, including the high [unclear – 0:04:12.4] up, we're all working flat out, large caseloads, long hours. And then something crops up, all of us think...obviously we're devastated about what happens but I think there's also...I think people forget that there are thousands of children that we actually also save as well.

And I go back again and again and say, 'We didn't kill anyone. We didn't cause the neglect.' You know? And when you have such a high-profile case...when I was newly qualified I had four accidental deaths on my caseload.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Wow.

Alisdair Kennedy:

All were teenagers. And each had a Scottish Office investigation. And each of them was in the press because Scotland was quite a small country, obviously it hit the headlines. You know, I was really competent and confident in my practice. So I felt I didn't need to worry but because the press was all over it there was...it was the early days of social media so there wasn't that scrutiny that, you know, people like Becky starting now have all that, you know, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Threads, the whole lot. You know, people are from all sides. It was mostly kind of red-top newspapers that things were in and they'd got to the family. And although I was devastated by all of the deaths – I truly was – and they were so unfortunate and, you know, it wasn't 'cause I neglected a family or anything like that. It was accidental deaths and health issues. But they still focused on the social work intervention. And luckily, actually, in the newspaper the parents had said that I'd done quite a good job. They'd mentioned that the boy...one of the boys had a social worker. But at the same time I was

still thinking, 'What are my case notes like? Have I visited enough?' There was still that, 'Oh my God,' you know, 'Have I done everything I should have done?' And you know, I had to go to all the funerals. And in a dark-humoured way only you get in social work I had to manage – and bear in mind this is a long time ago; it probably wouldn't happen now – but my manager came back and the only support I got was he came up to me, and I still had my funeral outfit on, and he said, 'Well, you can take another case now.' That was the dark humour.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Gosh.

Alisdair Kennedy:

And I secretly went to the toilet and had a cry in the toilet. But you know, and those deaths and those subsequent enquiries kind of finished me off, and I left my tour of duty, as I call it, and I moved into criminal justice. But I think social workers, you know, and managers and DSCs are often vilified. As I say, you know, ultimately you don't kill the children or neglect the children. It's that simple. I think we do our very best under really extreme circumstances. [unclear – 0:07:10.1] agendas are so prevalent now that, you know, it's so difficult to be out and seeing people and also having to...the amount of paperwork that we've all got to do. And then in another breath you've got Ofsted as well, in some respects, particularly around fostering and adoption stuff. And residential. Looking over your shoulder, and that's an added pressure as well.

And I think people's perceptions of social workers have changed, definitely in 30 years. When I started out, social workers could kit out whole houses for families with Section 17 monies. I remember having a family that we bought a doorbell for and doormats and cutlery. And nowadays that just wouldn't happen. So people's perception of what social workers do, I think, in the media, I think back then we had a little bit more of, like 30 years ago, had a little bit more kudos and people kind of respected us a little bit more. But the perceptions of the general public have definitely changed in recent years, particularly with the dawn of social media and getting it from all angles. Definitely.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That's really interesting, 'cause I was going to ask you how you think it's changed. I didn't expect that to be the answer. That's quite an eye-opener. You've obviously been through a lot, and especially in your early days of your career. You mentioned team morale. Of course, it affects team morale. What about senior leaders? How do they address it in your workplaces, more recently say, when something big happens? Do they address it? [0:08:40.7]

Alisdair Kennedy:

I think some do. And I think, yeah, I mean, I made that, you know, that dark-humoured manager who said, 'Well, you can take another case now.' That doesn't happen now. I mean, that just wouldn't happen now. I think people have still, you know, have a lot of support they can get from local authorities and from agencies that they work for, I think more so than they did, you know, when I started out in social work. And I think that's, you know, a good thing and, you know, they can go to HR.

But I think a huge part of it is always your team, and getting that support from your team. You can have all the things in place but if

you've got a really supportive team and one that's a permanent team that's around you, and surrounds you and supports you, I think that's a really important thing.

I think, you know, DCSs, heads of service, assistant directors and stuff, you know, are a lot more supportive than they've ever been, I think. And I mean, it's still a difficult time and there's always in these things lessons to be learnt and scrutiny and whatever, you know. But I think it's a lot better than it was. But Becky'll know more than I would in terms of what support's like now, in terms of if anything happens.

Becky Salter:

I don't know what it was like years before, but from my experience, you know, qualifying during a pandemic and lockdown was interesting in itself, you know, because it was virtual and that wasn't, you know, well, I don't think that's why anybody gets into social work. It's not like we got into social work but all of a sudden, you know, sort of my final year of study was very much, you know, behind a screen and I wasn't getting the opportunities to go out. So I really needed those opportunities to get together with the team. And in my first year of practice when lockdown was just sort of being lifted and it was tentative about, you know, what visits would take place, how many people could be in the office, who was in the office, you know, and how much you were working at home. So that virtual platform has been really supportive. And I think, you know, from my experience, supervisions have changed and, you know, they're discussed as being changed and new.

So there's definitely a lot of focus on reflection and, you know, every month we'll have...kind of in my current team we'll have monthly reflective, you know, times basically as a group where, you know, there might be something particularly that is causing a bit of confusion to one social worker. They might feel a bit stumped, they might feel a little bit lost about where to go, and we'll get together and, you know, be reflective as a team, really. And then sometimes it is just that classic case of, 'Oh, I didn't think of that,' and somebody else has. But we kind of need to be together to do that.

And that can be talking about maybe that things have come up in, you know, in the press as well if it's really worrying you. But I know supervisions are definitely kind of quite reflective in their model at the moment.

And there's so much to talk about with, you know, the families that you're supporting anyway. But generally, you know, it's very much built on a model there where we start with, you know, the social worker themselves and, 'How are you doing?' and, 'What is going through your head at the moment? What do you want to talk about in particular?' So I think that's really helpful because I just think it's been such a strange time for everybody. That need for kind of reconnection again has been really vital. So...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So what about, say, the DCS or, you know, really senior management? Do they mention...have you had the experience where they've mentioned something, a newsletter...like for example, Finlay Boden wasn't...he passed away not so long ago, or it came out in the media not so long ago, earlier this year. Did they talk about it? Did

anything come up? Or was it just literally in your peer supervision or just amongst your immediate colleagues that you discussed it?
[0:12:14.5]

Becky Salter: In my experience, yeah, mainly within colleagues, yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay.

Alisdair Kennedy: Yeah, mine as well. I mean, it was obviously, as a head of service you were looking at the reports that came out and trying to analyse what had gone on and to see if there was any, you know, what mistakes were made if there were any...and then looking at the works that you do as well. But it wasn't widely discussed. And there were things sent out via email, which was more about, you know, quite rightly, about sympathy and thinking about what had, you know, the deaths and what had gone on. But not really discussed in great detail.

Again, I think it's that we try to think about the thousands of other kids that were actually, you know, that we're working with at the same time, and we've all got those huge priorities. Not to take away from the deaths of those children. But there are obviously...we're all busy and it's trying to look after all the other children that we've got, you know?

Sharmeen Ziauddin: When you're working with families, have there been instances where the fear of the media getting wind of something that could potentially go wrong, has it affected your decision-making or how you've worked on the case? Is it something that is on your mind a lot? [0:13:33.4]

Becky Salter: I think what you mentioned earlier, Alisdair, really is I think sometimes when I've had a really busy and a really good week, you know, and I've met lots of families and I've been doing lots of things that I should be doing, but I haven't had time to evidence it because I've been busy doing it, if you know what I mean, and that's always at the back of my mind. That worries me quite a lot recently because I, like, haven't been quick enough to write up the fact that I, you know, had a great morning with a child or a family this morning. But it might be, you know, I don't know what time...you know, it might be a day, two days later, but that kind of is quite prevalent in my mind at the moment about how long it takes me to actually evidence what I've been doing practically sometimes. And I don't know if that's directly as a result of the media, but I think it is definitely a part of it in my subconscious, and it's something I've definitely said to my colleagues and my line manager, like, 'I've been really busy. I've been doing stuff. It's just not quite evidenced yet. But it'll be there.' You know? So...

And that can sort of sometimes take away from you feeling that you're accomplishing things because, you know, I am accomplishing things and I'm doing things and stuff, but actually I'm still constantly playing catch-up 'cause I'm like, 'I know I've done that, physically done that. But nobody knows because officially it's not there yet 'cause I've not evidenced it. It's not written up, it's not been actioned fully.' So yeah, that I suppose maybe has a little bit to do with the media.

Alisdair Kennedy: Yeah. I think sometimes if you are doing like an unannounced, anonymous referral, so for a child protection thing, people will kind of mention bits and pieces during the visit if you've just turned up at a

doorstep, you know, that's been unannounced, people will, say, mention certain high-profile cases. But in most cases it's not that often, I don't think. You know, people don't mentioned it more often.

I think what I've noticed the most, in terms of social media, and Becky will have experienced this more than I have – it's only been when I've been out with social workers – is the amount of people videoing you! It was completely alien to me and now it's really prevalent. However, you never really see those videos anywhere online. So I don't know where all those videos go. But people do get videoed a lot more. And they are entitled to video you by, you know, there's no reason they can't. But if you are competent and confident in what you do and what you say, and you've planned the visit ahead – which I always try and tell people to do and spend time before you go out – then people shouldn't really be that bothered about being videoed. But it is really intrusive and you do wonder where those videos go in terms of social media.

But I think from a social work point of view, if I were doing so many things wrong as the media lays out, there would be huge amounts of YouTube channels full of videos of social workers being absolutely awful at their jobs. But there aren't. It's funny, I know there's about two. And even those people were actually very competent in their jobs, the ones I've seen. If you just punch in 'social work visits UK', I think there's two videos and actually, the social workers are really, really competent and really professional in them. It's the people videoing them that aren't!

So the videoing thing is definitely a new thing and something that surprised me, and something that I had to talk about in one of my videos on my YouTube channel, and to tell people, you know, 'This is the way to manage it.' And that came from personal experience 'cause it was new to me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Becky, have you been videoed? [0:16:58.9]

Becky Salter:

No. I've been fortunate in a way, 'cause I don't know how I'd feel about it, in a way. And I've not had to confront that yet. But no, I've not been, and I don't know of anybody that has. So it's not really a discussion that I've had. But it was part of my degree. You know, as part of the learning we were shown, particularly during one lecture, you know, a video of a social worker going out and being videoed. So you know, I'm aware that it's there. But fortunately... 'cause yeah, I think it's a bit of a strange one. I'd be more... I wouldn't necessarily be concerned, but then I'd be concerned about where it was going to end up and in what context, you know. That's the bit that would worry me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I can imagine it being quite daunting for a newly qualified social worker who may not have had that much experience. I can imagine it being a little bit daunting being videoed.

Becky Salter:

Yeah, because you're still questioning yourself, I think. Imposter syndrome, you know, is prevalent. Maybe throughout your career but definitely in the first few years, you know, like me, I'm still kind of questioning things. So yeah, you would kind of... It's all about relationship-building as well, isn't it? And if you maybe get asked a

question like that or, you know, and you say no, I would question, you know, 'How am I going to build my relationship from here? I'm trying to get off to a good footing and it almost seems like I've come back with a negative, you know, already.' But yeah.

Alisdair Kennedy: It's almost like having a direct observation again.

Becky Salter: Yeah.

Alisdair Kennedy: You start thinking, 'Hang on, this is like being a student again! I'm being observed.'

Becky Salter: I think for me, I'd probably react by saying, 'Well, it might just affect the kind of conversation that we're going to have. It won't feel as natural because I'm going to be conscious that you're pointing a phone or some kind of camera in my face.' In the same way, like you said with direct obs, you know, you try your best to be as relaxed as you can but you know you're being watched, you know that somebody's going to be writing something and you need feedback at the end of it, and it never seems to be as natural as you want it to be. So yeah, potentially that.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Have service users talked to you about any high-profile cases as they happen in the media or you've gone on a visit and they've mentioned anything or brought it up? [0:19:10.9]

Becky Salter: For me they've not mentioned any specific high-profile cases but I do think it's a definite barrier with some families. You start from that starting point where they particularly think the only role of a social worker is to remove children. And you have to start from that basis of saying, 'It's actually the opposite. You know, we're doing our best to try and keep families together. That's what our role is. It's not our role, it's the last thing in the majority of cases, you know, that you want to do.' Sometimes there are situations where unfortunately you don't, you know, for the child you've got to keep them safe. You know, so...but I've not had direct case quotes or anything. But I have had just that assumption. And yeah, it takes quite a lot to, you know, keep having those conversations all the time about, 'Here to do the direct opposite.' Try to use, you know, sometimes you know, 'It'll be great. You know, as soon as I can walk out of your life then, you know, that'll mean that we've done something really great together and you've achieved what you need to achieve. And I want to be in your life for the least amount of time possible. That will be the real positive from this.' So...

Alisdair Kennedy: That's a good way of putting it.

Becky Salter: Yeah. It's changing the narrative, really.

Alisdair Kennedy: No, I was just saying that's a good way of putting it, Becky, actually. I might steal that! That is genuinely a good way of saying it.

Becky Salter: I think I've probably pinched it or paraphrased it a little bit from *Nanny McPhee*, you know that kind of...

Alisdair Kennedy: Oh, have you?

Becky Salter: That's how I sometimes, with children or families, I'm like, 'You might think of me as this, you know, beastly person right now, coming into your life, you know, just at the worst time and have all these images of me, but hopefully by the time I leave you might have a bit of a softer impression, you know, and you'll be pleased for me to go!'

Alisdair Kennedy: Yeah, I like that. That's good.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Have you, either of you or your authorities that you've worked for, been involved in any high-profile cases? And if so, how did that affect the whole organisation? [0:21:07.5]

Becky Salter: No, not that I'm aware of.

Alisdair Kennedy: I mean, I can only talk about the four accidental deaths that I had on my caseload. Yeah, and it had a ripple effect through the whole organisation. You know, people were worried about... 'cause obviously the scrutiny on myself and case notes and what we were doing, and the work that we were doing. And it was in the paper. And it did have a ripple effect through the teams. And it did affect team morale because people were genuinely worried. Back...that was a while back and some of the caseloads that we had were enormous. At the time I had about 40 children on my caseload, ten of which were on the child protection register. So it did make us all wobble a bit, in terms of, you know, what were we doing, how were we doing it, and were we doing it, you know, were we doing enough?

So yeah, I think any of those things have an effect on team morale. And I think nowadays when these things happen, I think working remotely is worse. Because a lot of people are returning to work but a lot of people are still working remotely and it can be very isolating. And if you're involved in something like that, you need the team around you, and it can be really isolating if something like that happens. Particularly if it's in the media. And nowadays, I mean, as I said before, with the amount of social media and the increase in scrutiny, you know, that must be even more difficult if you're just sitting at home on your own.

So I try and encourage everyone to come into the office now. To mixed reviews, I may add! Mixed reviews. A lot of people say, 'No, I like working at home.' And I've worked at home for years. But it does get quite isolating and you do need people around you to bounce ideas off, to learn from mistakes that you've made, to learn from the good things that you've done, to share the good things that you've done. People that you work with say...there's a video I did recently where I talked about the social work assistants that I worked with, Paula and Sheryl. And they taught me how to walk, how to talk, how to be a social worker. I was like...hadn't a clue. I was like 23. And they taught me how to change a baby's nappy. I'd never changed a baby's nappy! And they taught me. And if it wasn't for them, I'd have been absolutely hopeless. Absolutely hopeless. So I'm always saying to people, 'When these things happen, it's to get...you know, being amongst your team.' And have allies. Have those strong allies that...mood hoovers who are really positive, and people that you can really rely on, that you can trust.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Let's turn our attention to soaps. We've spoken about real life. What about fiction? Most recently, *Eastenders* received a lot of complaints after a baby had a bruise on its arm and there were empty beer and wine bottles lying around in the home, and after seeing this the social worker immediately took the child away with the mother in hysterics. Has it annoyed you in the past how social workers are sometimes portrayed on TV? [0:24:18.6]

Becky Salter:

Yeah. Well, I don't watch any soaps. I just never have. I've not. Because I just don't think they're a good portrayal of real life anyway. Because you don't have planes crashing and the amount of things that go on, you know, that typically... But it does seem to be that sometimes when I am flicking through TV at the end of the night or whatever, there's been one or two occasions. So I couldn't name specific storylines but just recently I did flick through and kind of thought, 'What's this all about?' And I don't know the names of the characters or anything but they appeared to be in what looked like a family group conference. And so that held my attention for a few minutes. And all I can really comment is it's not really like any family group conference that I've ever been involved in, you know, heard about, and it was very different.

And I think what annoys me about that is when you see the actors and actresses talk about the amount of research they do for particular, you know, areas and how seriously they take the characters, and for the amount of people out there that watch soaps, love soaps and believe absolutely everything is true, then that kind of representation gets very frustrating.

Alisdair Kennedy:

Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, the way social work is portrayed, you know, we're portrayed as nasty child-catchers, argumentative. It's just not representative. I mean, most social workers, we get into the job 'cause we're kind, we're caring, we're good listeners. You know, we want to work with families. As Becky said, we want to have as little input as we can and sort things out and move on. So we don't just ever turn up and remove children. Although there is a video, which is one of my most-watched videos, where I did actually go to a house and I did remove three children because the house was absolutely jumping and it was full of drug-users. And I even took the dog. And I had to go to a phone box and make a phone call. That's how long ago it was. And I'm not advocating that any social worker does that, 'cause I got suspended and I had to come back to work. But those kind of things are very rare.

But you know, truly in 30 years I've probably removed fifteen children in an emergency. And even in that emergency you've got probably, like, ten to fifteen meetings beforehand, thousands of reports that you've had to look over, or you've been in court for hours and hours, or you've spoken to whoever. It's not just as simple as turning up 'cause somebody's got a bruise on their arm and there are some beer bottles and that kind of stuff. So you know, if, as I said, before, if we did do that and we just rocked up and started removing children, YouTube would be full of social work videos, people posting social work videos about the amount of children we'd removed. And there aren't many. So these are just... And I know it's the soaps, they have to do it for effect. But I always hate the way that social workers are

portrayed as this, you know, child-catcher. Or what is it, that film? 'Lollipops, lollipops,' you know? It's like...I can't even remember. Is it...*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Becky Salter: It's the Child-Snatcher, wasn't it? With his little...

Alisdair Kennedy: That's what everybody says. It's child-snatching. And I'm like, 'That's not what I do!' You know? And it's funny, I went to a barbecue once and everybody was out the back, and all these people had obviously just new babies or whatever. And they had all the baby monitors in the houses. And we're outside and we're having this barbecue. And people were asking who does what jobs and I said, 'Oh, I'm a social worker,' and they all dived for the baby monitors and they all vanished! 'Cause they just thought, 'Oh my God, he's going to take my children off me!' And I was like, 'What?' There's this representation of...that we just go into houses and remove. It's just totally false.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That raises a really good question. Do you tell people you're a social worker when you are with families who aren't good friends of yours, who don't know what you do? We had a poll about this on Community Care recently, and I think 43% said they do tell people they're social workers. And that was just...it's not a majority. But has that crossed your mind? [0:28:34.0]

Becky Salter: I always tell people I'm a social worker 'cause that's the truth!

Sharmeen Ziauddin: It is. It is.

Becky Salter: That's what I do. I've got no intention...I mean, I might be very careful, like you said, about aspects of social media in my life, and obviously I know I can't talk about, you know, work outside of work or anything. But I do tell them that. But then even my closest friends, who I would say a lot of are also social workers, so sometimes it's safe, you know, that they understand if I say I've had a really difficult day, you know, they'll really understand that. But even some of my friends, you know, will make that joke, like Alistair said, like the ones with children, 'Oh, they've had a bump today. Oh, I'd better...' you know. And it is that kind of joke that you just think, 'Yeah, but that's not what I do.'

Alisdair Kennedy: That's not what we do.

Becky Salter: It's not what I do so...

Alisdair Kennedy: Exactly.

Becky Salter: But no, it's never stopped me telling anybody that that's what I do.

Alisdair Kennedy: No, I'm really proud to be a social worker, and I tell people. Most people's reaction is that old Micky Flanagan joke where, 'Oh, I could never do your job in a million years. A million years.' And my wife's a nurse as well, and she hates all... Whenever we're on holiday she actually pretends she's not a nurse because everybody then on holiday will come up with a sore foot or a bit of sunburn or whatever. Whereas if I say I'm a social worker people just usually go, 'Oh right, okay, right.' 'Cause they don't know what kind of social work you do.

But most people will say, 'Oh, I could never do your job.' And you go, 'Yeah, well, yeah, 'cause you're not qualified to do it, so no you can't!'

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I mean, there is a lot of misconception out there about social work. I mean, before I started working for Community Care I didn't know about social workers either. My first reaction would be, 'Social workers – oh, they take children away.' Absolutely. And you know, I would regard myself as an educated person. But it's just because I've never come across a social worker, I don't know. I just know what I hear in the media, what I see on TV, 'cause I used to watch *Eastenders* a lot when I was younger. So absolutely there is that perception out there, unfortunately. What do you think is the best way to counteract the kind of negativity we see in the media? I mean, you said about being on social media to combat that, but what else? I mean, BASW has said that it does offer to read scripts and it's trying to help with portraying more realistic images of social workers. Do you think that's working? I mean, it sounds like a really positive step but I don't know if anything's changing, really. [0:31:09.9]

Alisdair Kennedy:

Well I'm kind of biased 'cause I write for BASW magazine, *Professional Social Work*. And actually, to be fair to Shaheed, who's the editor, he actually lets me post, you know, write really straightforward articles about social work from the point of view of social workers, and it's no-holds-barred, you know, nothing's hidden. So fair dues to him, you know.

I think during the pandemic it was interesting that social workers weren't even mentioned by Boris Johnson until two years after, you know, into the lockdown. And there were social workers who were held...you know, Belinda Rose probably no one's heard of her, who died tragically in London. And if you look at ONS data there's been about 1,000 social care workers in England – as I say, social workers – who died of Covid on the frontline. And social workers were mentioned about two paragraphs by Social Work England in 2020, in June 2020.

I think BASW does its best and I think it does try to promote the positives of social work. I think there needs to be more in mainstream media, and especially on television. And when people roll out the, you know, BBC News or Sky News, that we actually have BASW, Social Work England front and centre, or the unions front and centre saying, you know, 'This is...' promoting...not just being on the back foot all the time but being on the front foot, saying, 'This is what we're doing.' Really positive, I think.

And Community Care, actually. I mean, you do that a lot. You see a lot of local authorities promoting really positive messages about their local authorities, which is really good. But it's not spread wider. And I think the social media side of it, like I've said before, and all those mediums, and newly qualified social workers, that can help greatly. But I still think there's a lack of front-foot work in terms of, you know, being on BBC News, being on one of the, you know, the television media. Rather than what they tend to do is just roll out someone with safeguarding knowledge when something bad happens.

So I get phone calls from BBC News, Sky all the time, and I always just say, 'Nah, no thanks. I'm not going to do it.' 'Cause I'm not just going to get rolled out when it's just negativity. If it's something that's a positive message, fantastic. And I think you've had people on Community Care. I've read some of the articles. And you're saying, 'These are the things that we should be doing.' It's putting, you know, our front foot forward and saying, you know, 'Come and be a social worker. It's a really positive job. It's a job for life. It's something you can work, you know...' I never say you can make a difference, 'cause you can make a difference in many jobs. But you can actually change lives. And that's what we should be promoting, that we actually do change lives.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I mean, the campaign that we're running is exactly about that because there isn't enough knowledge in the public domain about social work, like there is about teaching or becoming a nurse, becoming a doctor, becoming a policeman, all those public sector jobs. Everybody knows about them, everybody knows what they do. From a very young age children know what all these different professions are. Social work, however, only if you've had social services in your life will you actually come across a social worker and know what they do.

Becky Salter:

And that's the point though, isn't it, I think. Everybody's got their favourite teacher because most of the population go to school and have been through an education and have had teachers who have got a good understanding. You know, most people, for good or bad things, you know, have been to their GP, they've been to the doctors, maybe they've been to a hospital, they've had a nice nurse. You know, so they've had those interactions. You know what your lollipop lady does. You know that the police are there to keep you safe. That's the general message that generally is sent out and stuff. But unless you've had a positive experience with a social worker, people don't know what you've done. And then if you've only got that negative portrayal in the press where social workers come and take children away, then it's not going to give you any aspiration, really, or curiosity even, really, to find out all the different areas of social work and what you could do. And ultimately, I think social work is just about liking people. It's being curious about, you know, other human beings and how to make their life better. But if you're not getting that message because you don't know, you know, the stereotypes are doctors, nurses, teachers, aren't they? And it's like, well, do children know what they do? Yeah. 'I want to go and do that.' You know, so...

Alisdair Kennedy:

Yeah. And I think we're still quite a small bunch. I mean, there's about 100,000 social workers. I think it's...I can't remember the numbers that are in children and families but we're still quite a small bunch of people. So it's about having that push and that drive amongst the 100,000 who cover all facets of social work, not just children and families. And I think we forget about that as well, is that social work covers a multitude of jobs and roles. And I know I'm bad for that because, you know, my channel is mostly about children and families. But you get adults and all sorts of stuff going on.

And we need to consolidate the positivity that all of us have for the job. 'Cause we all get out of bed every morning and go to the job, and

it's really difficult and it's hard and we work incredibly hard. And we're exceptionally over-qualified. Social workers are the most over-qualified people in the world, in the workforce. You know, I was a teacher, I started out as a teacher. I'm now more over-qualified as a social worker, to become a social worker. And new social workers...I only had to do two years. Now they're doing five years and stuff. And it's like, that's amazing. And we don't shout that from the rooftops about how qualified we are, the amount of post-qualifying training that we do, the expertise that we have, you know, the nuances of the work that we do. We don't get any kudos for that because we don't shout loud enough about it. And we should be. We should really be saying, 'Look at the stuff that we've done here, the positives.' Yeah. It's difficult how you do that.

And I think there's a bit of that starts with BASW, Social Work England, politicians, DCSs and local authorities plus the, you know, mainstream media and getting ourselves on the front foot.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Let's round off with some tips that you can offer practitioners who maybe are newly qualified or haven't been in the job that long when something really tragic happens and the media and the tabloids are all over it, bringing the profession down. Any advice you can offer on how to deal with such a scenario? [0:37:50.7]

Becky Salter:

I think you've got to...it's all about self-care. So I think you've got to actually weight up, 'Do I want to read this?' You know, you've got to be well-informed. It's good to know what's going on in the news. But do you know what? In general I've stopped watching the news on a daily basis, full-stop. Because everything is quite sad, you know, at the moment. And some days I'm just like, 'I can't...I need to come home and I need to switch off and I need a little bit more positivity in my life.' So sometimes you've just got to weight up, you know, 'How is this going to affect me?' if I've had a difficult day or if it's, you know, a similar scenario to what you're dealing with in your daily job. So I think self-care is really important in what you do.

I used to go swimming a lot after work and just use that headspace just not to think and just to be in the water and, you know, things like that. So I think it's a bit of a buzzword, 'self-care', isn't it? But I think it's really important.

And then I just think that the basics are, you know, if something really is particularly being in the news, it's going to be talked about in the office anyway. And you're going to be able to talk through and rationalise. Well, we know that the actual process is...not all of that is getting commented on, not all of that is being brought out in the media because they don't understand or because of confidentiality it can't be shared. So you're only going to get a bit of it. So you can rationalise things, I think, and that potentially will help pick apart, you know, what is maybe being put out there.

Alisdair Kennedy:

Yeah. Well, hopefully we don't have to deal with it. Because these incidences are so rare. I mean, they genuinely are very rare. And when they do come up, I think I agree with Becky. I think self-care's key. You know, don't be going on Twitter. If you do go on Twitter it's all positive messages you put out about social work. Don't slag off the

media on any social media that you use. Try and surround yourself with positive people, not the mood-hoovers but positive people who are going to discuss and help you through what could be a difficult time if you're near to it or you've been affected by it.

I think, like Becky, what I do now is...I very rarely watch the news and I also switch my phone off before I go to bed and I put it downstairs and I leave it charging downstairs so that I don't get notifications and things beeping and pinging all the time about bad news coming up. And that would be my one tip, is to switch your phone off when you don't need to be looking at it all the time. You'll save yourself a lot of time and a lot of angst when you're just constantly getting notifications. In fact, I've switched every single notification off on my phone. So I don't get anything apart from Tesco!

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That's really good advice, not just for social workers but for many different people. All people, maybe!

Alisdair Kennedy:

Yeah. It is a detox but the notifications are the worst thing. And seeing the numbers racking up on Twitter of things you've not looked at and stuff, nah. And if it's all negativity about social workers.

And also I would say that, in terms of social media, is when I started out on Twitter I was genuinely surprised about how much I got trolled for a start, for being a social worker, genuinely got really badly trolled. And they published loads of personal stuff that was generally in the...you know, online you could find it. It wasn't anything personal, personal. But it was, like, stuff you could find anyway. But got genuinely trolled.

So what I had to do was just pick out like-minded people like Becky and her social work connections, and people like that, and join that positivity and try and block people that were that negativity side of it and people that I just didn't want to engage with, and be very careful. I'm very careful now in terms of Sociable Social Worker who I engage with and who I talk to, and not join in conversations that could possibly lead you down a rabbit hole that you don't want to go down.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So you were getting trolled for just being a social worker and being out there on social media? Not for anything specific? [0:41:56.6]

Alisdair Kennedy:

Yeah, pretty much. Yeah. It was specific about stealing children, abducting children, all that kind of stuff. They published all sorts of different things about me. It was really nasty stuff, you know, calling me a paedophile, saying I had scary eyes. I mean, these were mild ones. 'Would you buy a car off this man?' and all this kind of stuff! You know, I just laughed. All my friends and my family said, 'Actually, that's really bad. That must really dent you.' And I said, 'Actually, I just find it quite funny.' I mean, even there was a comment the other day about...if you look at my comments on my YouTube channel, the majority, to be fair, are all very, very positive. There's a lot of negativity in there and I just brush it off. I just find it quite funny. I think it's just keyboard warriors sitting at home, you know, They're anonymous, you know. But some of it can be, you know, when they're starting to say things like, 'You're a paedophile and you steal children,' it's nasty stuff. But on the whole, I think generally in social

media people are generally quite positive. 'Cause I'm across, you know, like Becky's been on YouTube, she's on Twitter. I'm on Instagram. I think Becky is as well. You know, and people are generally quite positive. And so you just have to keep within that positive group of people.

Becky Salter: Yeah, it's just picking who you...and what you want to do. 'Cause like you said, I haven't had any real idea and mainly got involved in one particular position about Siobhan Maclean. So I'm reading [unclear – 0:43:29.3] practice books as a student and then, you know, because of the pandemic she had this really good idea about, you know, the universities had shut, we'd stopped learning, we were kind of like, 'What do we all do now?' and you know, that was very much her idea and her drive. But she used students to help her to put together webinars. So they're really positive. And then like yourself, Alisdair, you cropped up, and at the time particularly students were yearning, 'cause we were like, 'How are we going to learn? What are we going to do? Where are we going to learn? Who's going to help us?' And there were very few, in a way.

And if you don't know where to start looking either, if...I hadn't really been on Twitter until then. I didn't really know what Twitter was about. I'm still a bit, you know, confused sometimes about what I want to use it for and stuff but, you know, I think Twitter probably has helped me learn the most, is the most sort of social work platform, in a way. And it's creeping into other platforms like Instagram and obviously, like you said, YouTube. And there's Kayleigh Rose Evans out there and stuff. And generally they're the positive. And if you know you're going to learn something from it, you know, if it's going to help you, then you know that those are the right people to sort of ask questions of or follow or whatever, and just forget about, you know, other people that are...I like you saying 'mood-hoovers'. I quite like that!

Alisdair Kennedy: My friend said that. I stole that from her! Like, it's a really good language, 'mood-hoover'. It's good, 'mood-hoover'.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thank you both. It's been really lovely speaking to you.

Alisdair Kennedy: Yeah. Thank you for having me.

Becky Salter: Yeah.

Alisdair Kennedy: I can't talk for you Becky, sorry! Thank you for having me!

Becky Salter: That's alright. Thank you very much!

Alisdair Kennedy: Thank you very much!

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That was the lovely Alisdair and Becky. I hope you enjoyed listening to the episode as much as I did making it. We've got some big news at Community Care. We have launched a new site, which you can find at www.thesocialworkcommunity.com. You can sign up for free and become a contributor. Once signed up, you can ask a question or start a discussion about a topic within social care that you think needs talking about. You'll find careers information and inspiration, and be able to connect with other social work professionals.

Here at Community Care we have two other podcasts that you should add to your library. The first is Employer Zone Insights podcast, which showcases important issues within the social care sector in collaboration with different organisations. And then there's our Inform Learn on the Go podcast, where experts and academics in the social care sector discuss research, theories and practice issues. Both can be found on Spotify, Google, Apple or wherever you get your podcasts from. So go and give them a follow.

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That's all for now. See you next time.