

## Returning to work after becoming a new parent

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Kirsty Ayakwah: Hello, and welcome to Season 2 of The Social Work Community podcast, where we speak directly to social workers about the topics and issues impacting them and shaping the profession.

My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the senior careers editor at Community Care, and in this episode you were just listening to Amy, who along with fellow social worker Brooke, celebrate being first-time mothers and discuss the support they've received from Essex County Council since returning to their roles.

Amy is a team manager in the Care Quality Commission Service improvement team in adults' services, a secondment role she secured while on maternity leave.

Meanwhile, Brooke works in a family support and protection team in children's services. Both social workers prove that being a parent is no barrier to career progression at Essex County Council, and highlight how supportive management structures have helped them to achieve a work-life balance which impacts positively on children, family and adults they support.

Amy kicks off the conversation. [0:01:24.3]

Amy: So Brooke, first-time mums. How was it for you?

Brooke: Difficult. I mean, being a first-time mum is overwhelming in any way, shape or form really, isn't it?

Amy: Yeah. A lot harder than I thought it was going to be.

Brooke: A lot more sleepless nights than I thought it was going to be too.

Amy: Yeah. And I've decided that if anyone actually...you believed anyone that told you that you were going to have that little sleep, I don't think anyone would have babies.

Brooke: Correct. Absolutely not, no.

Amy: So what was your expectation when you came back to reality, back in social work? [0:02:01.7]

Brooke: So, obviously I'm in family support and protection, which is like a frontline, kind of fast-paced team. I think for me it was the fact of feeling like I had to almost start again. And so I ended up having eleven months off. I'd planned to have twelve months but I ended up having eleven months, which I'd had conversations with my manager before about coming back early. And because it's so fast-paced there was change of staff, change of kind of families and children that we worked with, and I felt like I was going to have to kind of almost come in at a fresh start, which I soon learnt that, as I started getting my cases back, or new cases, back when I came back from maternity leave, it all just kind of comes back to you quicker than I think you planned.

That was helpful, knowing that then...we choose this job 'cause we enjoy this job. It's not necessary a job; it's a vocation. So it's about being able to feel that you're doing a good job as well. So I think being able to come back and not feeling like I have to start again and be able to go straight back in was really helpful.

Amy, I know yours is a bit different, isn't it? 'Cause you're in a managerial role. [0:03:06.8]

Amy: Yeah. So I was just thinking about that. And it's almost like when you go away and you come back, it's like everything changes but nothing changes.

Brooke: Yeah.

Amy: It's a weird concept. So yeah, I was deputy team manager in a community team that was really fast-paced and hectic. And I think I always had in my mind that perhaps after maternity leave or during maternity leave I might look for something different because I'd done that role for, I think, six years. So, when this secondment came up, it was probably when Albert was about four months old. And I was really lucky, you know. I interviewed for it. I was really tired, I remember, the night before the interview. But I shared that with the interviewers. I said, you know, 'I'm running on limited sleep.' And you know, I was successful in securing that promotion to team manager, and that took me away from sort of typical frontline into a more strategic team for, like, service improvement.

So I think, yeah, it felt quite good to sort of come back and promote. It felt like a new identity, I guess, and coming back with new enthusiasm.

Brooke: Yeah.

Amy: I always think, when I look back at when people went on maternity leave, there might have been people in my team before, they would sort of go off for a year and then they would come back and come back part-time. But for me it wasn't like that. I've come back full-time, I've come back promoted. It's kind of changed, I guess, the way we would look at it and how I would look at it, say, five years' ago.

So, it's given me a lot of confidence, definitely now, to be able to say, 'Yes, I've had my family and I've come back and I'm still thinking about social work and what that looks like for me.'

Brooke: Yeah. It does make a big different, doesn't it, knowing that you can do both. Yes, some days are running on very limited sleep, and some days definitely need more coffee than others, but it's knowing that you can still do both.

Amy: Yeah.

Brooke: Yeah. And I feel like being supported in the team really, really helps. Like, I think my team manager has been incredibly supportive. And Amy, I don't know about you, but when my child started nursery I had every illness under the sun you could possibly name. So when I first came back from maternity, after kind of about three or four weeks, I felt like I was spending more time at home than I was spending at work. 'Cause she was just poorly every other week. It was another sickness bug or another illness. And I think, obviously I have to do statutory visits every ten days, which at times I wasn't physically able to do, but being able to be honest with my manager, and my manager being flexible with me and saying, 'That's okay, kind of life happens and you can't help it,' rather than kind of being frowned upon that I'd only been back three or four weeks and then was having to have a week off work sick, and being able to work from home was really helpful for me, because it meant that if my daughter was poorly – obviously we know they sleep a bit more when they're poorly – I could then put my laptop on and still get on with some work, but my manager would make a point of making sure you're not contactable. So you're doing the things that you need to do, and just kind of remembering to put yourself first. Even though you're putting your laptop on, you still have got a sick child at home.

So being able to kind of do both, weight up as a whole really, to be able to look after yourself and kind of your children at home, because obviously before this it was we'd do anything and kind of everything to make sure that the job was done. But actually, life gets in the way, doesn't it? [0:06:30.9]

Amy: Yeah. And I think it's that mental shift, isn't it? I also was ill. And I'd never...I remember saying to my new manager, because obviously

he didn't know me before, I said, 'I didn't have a day off sick when I was pregnant, I promise.' You know, because unfortunately I had to take some sick days and, yeah, Albert got the same. It was like freshers' 'flu but for nursery! And although my partner never got any, typically!

Brooke: No, me neither. Never! Why is that?

Amy: I'm not sure what happens there! So did you do any of the KIT days or anything? [0:07:06.3]

Brooke: Yeah, I did a few. I did...we have a team meeting every month. My team is separated into two teams. We are one big team but we have two managers and kind of split into pods, we'd call them. And we do team meeting days every month, and we have wellbeing things in that. So I went to a few of them. I attended some training days. So I think the KIT days for me, the keeping-in-touch days, were really helpful because I think some people think that they kind of...you have to go back into work for a day. And it's really broad actually about the different things that you can do, as well as using the training for a KIT day but also being able to use it as your CPD. It's not as black-and-white as it may have been five, ten years' ago, that you had to come into work and just sit there for a day.

You may have had a different experience, Amy. I don't know what it's like in your team for the KIT days. Did you do any? [0:07:50.7]

Amy: Yeah. So I did all my keeping-in-touch days and I'm like you, I spread them out a little bit. So at the time I was doing something which was called the Age Quest, which was looking at age discrimination within adults social care, looking at how we start the conversation about that protected characteristic. So for me, when I...I literally presented when I was heavily pregnant to the leadership team, and then I managed to come back in and follow that work up on my KIT days. So that was really nice because...

Brooke: That's nice.

Amy: ...when you've worked on a project it's hard to hand it over, isn't it, sometimes and be like, 'Okay, carry on without me!'

Brooke: Yeah.

Amy: I mean, it's not like obviously...I was excited about my new chapter. Yeah, it was good. And you know, when I came in on my KIT days I think even Nick Presmeg saw Albert. He went into his office. I've not even been into his office! And I still haven't been in his office! So that

was really nice 'cause it felt like you're part of the social care family, like...

Brooke: Yeah.

Amy: ...the leadership actually care about you. And I guess they'd seen me on that journey, getting bigger! And for them it was nice to see an end product as well!

Brooke: Yeah. I think having been able to do them as and when, I felt like you didn't feel like you were pressurised too much to do them either, made it a big help. So, 'cause you came back a bit earlier, didn't you, 'cause obviously you'd got the secondment...

Amy: Yeah.

Brooke: ...were you able to flexible work at home? [0:09:12.7]

Amy: Yeah. I was really lucky that I could carry on. So when I was pregnant they were supportive of me working at home more than I normally would. And then coming into this role as well, that support carried on. I still, despite ill health, managed to come in once a week to the office. But it is a slightly different role so I was able to have that more flexibility from where I worked, as opposed to when I was in a more fast-paced community team.

Brooke: I think it is helpful, isn't it, to be able to have that? I think where my team – and you're probably the same – are...we are able to merge our own diaries and put in our own visits and our own meetings. It definitely took me a while but it did make a difference of knowing my own schedule now as a mum, because also I have to then pick my daughter up from nursery and things like that, which I'd never had to think of before. So being able to think, 'Okay, well say for instance Tuesday afternoon, it's better if I work from home in the afternoon so then I can go and get her from nursery,' I think that was really helpful, being able to know that I had that flexibility.

Amy: Yeah. And just, I think, that support when you have to drop into a meeting, drop into the chat, 'I'm really sorry but I have to go.'

Brooke: Yeah.

Amy: I think it's just the understanding. People might be able to stay on but for you, I don't have a choice, the nursery closes. You know, you've got to get there, haven't you?

So I think for me as well, when I came back, I ended up being more empathetic and tolerant as a manager because I'd obviously managed people that were social workers and had children, but I

probably truly didn't understand what that pressure was and what that felt like. So yeah, I definitely understand that juggle between motherhood and social work.

Brooke: Yeah. I think I agree. I feel like I've got a bit more of a better relationship being able to actually relate on a parent level. There's some mums that I've helped their newborn baby latch on to breastfeed. There's a lot of questions I think I've been able to help with new mums that potentially they wouldn't have even asked me before because they knew I wouldn't have been able to answer.

But I also find that some parents that I work with now also respect me a bit more. I think before, on multiple occasions I had kind of thrown in my face, 'Well you don't know what you're talking about, you don't have children.' So I think being able to empathise and be like, 'Well, I've had the sleepless nights too. I know how difficult it is,' almost allows a parent to feel a bit more at ease with me because they know that I've gone through it as well. I'm not trying to tell them what to do and things like that when I have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about. And so I think that's been really helpful.

Amy: That's really nice. And I think the families are just going to really appreciate that as well. I don't, you know, I don't work with children and families directly but I think anything that's going to break down those barriers is brilliant.

Brooke: Yeah. I think that's exactly what it is. It's definitely broken down some barriers, kind of between the professionalism...and the title of 'social worker', I think whoever we work for I think that, whoever we work with, I think people have that perception, don't they, of a social worker, of the kind of negative things that they've heard. So I think being able to have that separate conversation of even parent-to-parent and being able to support them and be able to answer some more of their questions. So I think it's definitely being able to come back and have been supported by my manager and my colleagues and Essex as a whole, I think it's really nice, 'cause I think, like we've said in this, it potentially wasn't like this five, ten years' ago.

Amy: Yeah. It's good to see some change.

Brooke: Yeah, absolutely.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thanks for listening to this podcast. If you're an avid podcast listener, why not check out some of our other Social Work Community podcast episodes? Our first season went down a storm and was nominated in this year's British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Social Work Journalism Awards. You can listen to all of the episodes on the



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