

Christmas Special

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Hello and welcome to The Social Work Community podcast Christmas Special. I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, careers editor and host and producer of this episode.

So here's a question. How much do you know about Community Care? Yes, you've read our brilliant news stories on our website and you've probably got some of our newsletters over the years, and of course you're subscribed to this podcast. If you're not, this is the time to do it. Click 'follow' wherever you're listening to this. But did you know there are many strings in Community Care's bow? There's Community Care Inform, a highly regarded learning and resource platform. There is the job site for those of you looking for a new role or a step up the ladder. And there's The Social Work Community, an online community which offers a trusted, safe, positive space for social work professionals to get careers insights, network with peers and support each other.

As we are 50 this year and Christmas is coming, we thought we would give you an insight into some of the people behind ComCare, are we lovingly call it. We have some absolute legends here today. Combined, they've been at ComCare for over 80 years. That's way longer than ComCare itself which, by the way, is 50 years old this year. And that's why we're doing this special episode. So there is a wealth of experience and knowledge in this room.

So firstly I have Mithran Samuel, editor of Community Care. And then we have Natalie Valios, senior content editor for Inform Adults. And last but certainly not least we have Nicky Davies, head of partnerships and events. But what does that mean? Well, let's find out.

So Mithran, over to you. You're the editor and no doubt everybody listening has read at least one story written by you, if not hundreds of your articles. So tell us about your life at ComCare. When did it all begin? [0:01:53.2]

Mithran Samuel:

I very much hope that nobody's read hundreds of my articles, and if so, apologies! Yeah, I joined pretty much 20 years ago, December 2004, I believe. So just before Christmas. And I was previously working on not unrelated type of local government chronicle. And I was sort of vaguely head-hunted. That's probably a bit too pompous to say. But somebody suggested, 'Oh yeah, there's this role coming up.' Because I was already reporting on social work and social care at the time, and the news editor at the time, a very nice old colleague called Lauren Revens, suggested I apply. Yeah.

So I started as chief reporter in December 2004 and it was...shortly afterwards what we used to have was the Community Care Awards.

So I think was maybe the week after and that was a nice little jolly. So I kind of got the impression that essentially there wouldn't be too much work done and it would be a life full of jollies week after week! So yeah, it didn't work out quite like that! But yeah, it has been a lot of fun over the last 20 years.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Okay. Good to hear. What about you, Natalie? [0:03:12.2]

Natalie Valios:

So I joined in September 1993. And I joined on the subs desk, actually. So I was a sub-editor. So that means, for those who don't know, it means editing copy that comes in from the news and features desk at the time, 'cause it was a weekly magazine then. But I knew I wanted to write. I'd written in previous roles but this was my way into Community Care, which was the magazine that I wanted to work on.

So after a couple of years on the subs desk a job came up on the news desk so I moved along to the news desk, even though – and Mith will vouch for this – that news is not my forte! But it was my way into writing and there wasn't availability on the features desk. So I did my stint on the news desk for a few years and then the editor at the time very kindly, 'cause she knew how much I wanted to write features, created a hybrid role. So I did half my week on news, half my week on features. And then I managed to worm my way onto the features desk permanently.

And then I stayed there until 2009 when we had a big shake-up of the team and roles and stuff, and I took redundancy. But then I carried on freelancing for Mith, writing features, and then came back in 2013 to do a colleague's maternity cover. Community Care Inform Children had been set up by then. So I came and did the maternity cover and then during that year they created Inform Adults and offered me a permanent role on that.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Okay, we'll come back to Inform in a bit. Nicky, what about you? [0:04:48.4]

Nicky Davies:

Well, mine was right back to 1989. I saw an advertisement and it was to work in the sales team. And to be honest with you, I didn't really have much idea of what that would be. But I applied and I was particularly taken by the position that was on Community Care. I'd always been really interested in social welfare, social policy, even as a very young person. And successful and I secured the position.

And on my first day, interestingly, I was placed on the Farmers Weekly team, on *Farmers Weekly* magazine, which I was thinking, 'Not quite sure what's happened here. I thought I was going to be working on *Community Care*. But let's just go with the flow.'

Anyway, a great three months. And after that three months I was swiftly moved to Community Care in October '89. And to some point the rest is history but yes, an amazing sort of 36 years to date and a career that has spanned across recruitment, a range of advertising, marketing and conferences and events, which sort of almost leads us up to today. And obviously I've worked with my colleague and friend Natalie for almost 30 years, and obviously Mithran for 20. So a really tight team and, yeah, an amazing career which I hope will continue

for many more years. But delighted that, you know, to be here celebrating Community Care's 50th year.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I mean, it's really rare for anybody to work anywhere nowadays for so long. What would you say has been the biggest change? I mean, your role's changed. I mean, let's start with what you do currently, 'cause I think a lot of people don't know all the different things we do at Community Care, and I think one of the things you do I don't think people really know. So if you just could tell us what is your job role at the moment? [0:06:53.0]

Nicky Davies: Yep. So I'm head of partnerships and I also head up our events team.

So for head of partnerships I work really closely and I work predominantly on the recruitment team. And I am the strategic lead for working closely with many local authorities, looking at their recruitment, retention and workforce strategy. You know, an absolute delight to work with our local authority and large organisational partners.

So that's sort of my role on recruitment. But then I also head up our big event, Community Care Live. So I lead on that and, you know, we're 27 years into that event. So I just oversee that, run the project team, look after all the sponsors and exhibitors and partners.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So you've done 26 or 27 Community Care Lives? [0:07:42.6]

Nicky Davies: Yes.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Wow. That is amazing. That is an achievement in itself. So well done!

Nicky Davies: Thank you.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Natalie, tell us about Inform because actually, people who come to the website might not actually know about Inform. [0:07:58.6]

Natalie Valios: Yeah. I suppose if you don't know about it it's hard to know about it because it's subscription only. So Inform, we have two sites. One's for social workers working with children and families, and one is for social workers working with adults. I work on the adults' one.

So there's a paywall. Local authorities and other organisations subscribe to it and have licences for their teams, their social care workforce. And we provide practice guidance, which can be in-depth or quick guides, caselaw digests from our fantastic legal editor, Tim Spencer-Lane. And we have legislation, we have research and we have lots of webinars, podcasts and The Court Report, which is a regular webinar with Tim. So loads of really interesting and useful, helpful resources on the site that will help social care practitioners in their daily practice.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay, great. So Mithran, I'm going to ask you how has Community Care changed, and also how has the sector changed? 'Cause being the editor...I know you didn't start off as the editor but you have so much knowledge about the sector and, you know, you write in such detail and so quickly. We're all amazed at your speed of writing! So what, for you, has changed the most at work and in the sector? [0:09:23.6]

Mithran Samuel:

Yeah, I know. Thank you very much. That's very good of you to say. Yeah, no, it's been hugely...yeah, a huge amount of change over that time, and obviously there would have been, you know, much more change before even I turned up that Nat and Nicky will attest to. But yeah, since I arrived I guess, you know, it was quite a good time, I think, maybe, in the mid-2000s for, I suppose, public services generally, sort of the New Labour era. So you know, to be honest, people still did kind of moan about funding levels and things in those days. But they were fairly good, frankly. And you know, that was good for, you know, the services that were being delivered. I think it was, you know, was a good time for the quality of what, you know, people who received social work and social care services...yeah, were having at the time.

And you know, that was kind of good for us on a commercial level, as Nicky will remember. You know, the magazine at that time...I mean, I don't think it was the fattest but the magazine was...I think it was fatter earlier than that. But the magazine, as we still had, was fairly fat and full of plentiful job advertising and, you know, other forms of advertising. So that was good for us.

And then things did really start to change, and change in two fundamental ways, I would say. For the sector, you had like the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, the advent of the 2010 coalition government, and then the sort of decade, I suppose, of austerity, which particularly hit local authorities and, you know, was a really, really, really difficult time. Local authorities actually, you know, looking at it did very well to protect social care services as well as they could but, you know, at the time there was sort of significant demand, both on the children's and the adults' side, and you know, resources really struggled to keep up. So that was...you know, so a lot of that time was sort of...was us sort of chronicling that impact on the sector.

That obviously had a knock-on effect for us as a brand. But obviously you had, at the same time, a big change in the media landscape where, you know, it became harder and harder, particularly in the sort of, you know, business-to-business sector to maintain a sort of profitable sort of print product. So yeah, so over time we had to, you know, change and diversify. Natalie's already mentioned Inform. So the development of Inform was a very big part of that.

And then 2011 we had the, you know, the very sad closure of the magazine, which was a big...you know, I think probably we could have seen that coming but it was a big, big shock to the system. And we went online only. So that was a really big change.

I think those two remain the big sort of changes over my time at Community Care. I mean, obviously there's been a lot of change since but I think those would definitely stick out.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Right. So Nicky, how would you say Community Care has changed as an organisation, like the team dynamics? In 30 years there must have been a lot of change. [0:13:14.8]

Nicky Davies:

Yes, hugely. Obviously, as Mith has highlighted, you know, the change from being a magazine, being a print product, to moving

everything online, you know, changed the structure of the team and how we worked. We equally needed to bring in new and different skills, and also a lot of the team had to learn new skills as well.

And of course, a lot of those skills that you have in print are transferable to online, and you know, we've done that really successfully. But I do remember when I first joined we were an absolute massive team. Our editorial team, you know, news desk, you know, with news editors, features desk as Natalie had highlighted. We had art editors, production teams. Yeah. And you know, again, even the sales team. We had two big sales teams as well. And just the whole structure, I think, was bigger. I'm not viewing that it was better, but it was certainly bigger, and that's probably to cover off all the elements that you have to deliver for print. Sometimes I think actually, if people haven't worked in print, don't really realise sort of the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes, from collecting artwork or writing a story, and then getting it all over to the printers and working also then to your print deadlines. So things like that have really changed.

And of course, we had the launch of Community Care Live. We also run a conference portfolio for many years delivering a whole range of children's and adult conferencing. So of course we had that as well as actually, you know, the magazine and then obviously onto online.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

We've won – well I say 'we', I wasn't even here! – we've won a whole heap of awards in the last sort of 20 years. Natalie gave me a whole list! One of those...actually, I can't even read them out. There's too many to read out! But one of those obviously was Mithran's Outstanding Contribution to Journalism. That was a BASW journalism award just last year, which was amazing. That's a great highlight. I mean, that would have been memorable for all of you. But what other highlights have there been for you? Natalie? [0:15:27.5]

Natalie Valios:

In terms of awards or generally?

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Generally, generally.

Natalie Valios:

A personal highlight is...you don't get any freebies in this game. And I got one in my entire career at Community Care. But it was a fantastic one. I was writing a feature – it was when I was on the features desk – I was writing a feature on, at the time, adult social services directors had been given a really wide remit in their brief and I was covering some of the more obscure things that were included within their social services brief. And the Isle of Wight director had the Isle of Wight Festival. So I phoned her up and asked for an interview and she was telling me about it and planning it, and it was in a couple of weeks' time. And I just said, 'Oh, can I give you a call afterwards just to see how it went?' She said, 'Oh, why don't you come? I'll give you a couple of tickets. Come down, I'll give you a VIP ticket for the Saturday, and then just a general admission for the Sunday.'

So I went with a friend, Jess, who's actually on Inform with me. And it was the year that the Rolling Stones were headlining. Had Amy Winehouse...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Wow.

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Natalie Valios: ...Keane...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That is a highlight!

Natalie Valios: ...Paulo Nutini...Mews...it was really fantastic. Fantastic couple of days. But that's the only freebie I've ever had. But that's a particular highlight for me!

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Love it!

Nicky Davies: I love that, Natalie! I didn't know that!

Sharmeen Ziauddin: What about you, Nicky? There must be quite a few. [0:16:56.6]

Nicky Davies: Yeah, there is. There's...there's lots, honestly. I think maybe one for me is around some of the campaigns that we've done. And we've been so successful at winning. The editorial team have been so brilliantly winning those campaigns that we've done over the years.

But actually, something a little bit more recent. I was so proud to work on the Choose Social Work campaign that we ran last year. An absolute great initiative that I felt like the whole team were able to be involved in. And obviously our editorial colleagues, you know, really drove that forward with, you know, the stories, you know, gathering all those insights and information that we need to deliver a successful campaign. But Choose Social work to me was absolutely long overdue. I think as a profession it's a reminder to social workers about why they chose the profession, you know, why they wanted to become a social worker. And also to all the younger generation of people that are now starting to think about their careers. And I think there's so much profile for, you know, 'Be a nurse, be a teacher,' you know, if you're wanting to work in that line of work. But actually, sadly, not much around, you know, being a social worker. And for many, they wouldn't even really know what a social worker does.

So I think the whole campaign was really able to capture the essence of the role of a social worker. And it is a vocation. And actually, you've got a real opportunity to have a long career and work with our most vulnerable children, families and adults. And you know, seriously, I think that will be a real career highlight for me, this more recent campaign, because I think it really captures the essence of the work we do here at Community Care and for the wider social work community.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I'm really glad you mentioned the campaign because I can say, hand on heart, if there's one person who genuinely believes in social work at Community Care, it's you. And I know everybody does, but you especially do, and when I hear you speaking to clients you can tell it's not you're just saying it because it's a job; it's literally from the heart. So to believe in social work like you do is actually a really special thing.

Mithran, any highlights from you? [0:19:18.9]

Mithran Samuel: Well, I was going to say my highlight is you winning a BASW award for...

[laughter]

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Sharmeen Ziauddin: Stop it!

Nicky Davies: I love that!

Natalie Valios: Touché!

Mithran Samuel: Yeah, I mean, we've had some...I mean, yeah, Nicky's mentioned Choose Social Work, which was really great. And I think there have been some very strong campaigns run by Community Care over the years. And yeah, just some really great journalism. Just thinking of some things that past colleagues have done. We had a colleague who Natalie and I worked very closely with, Andy, who you know, was an amazing journalist and did some really great campaigns and sort of investigative reporting in relation to the mental health system in the sort of mid-2000s, which he won an award from the charity Mind for. And that was really...I mean, I wasn't involved with that. I was just cheering from the sidelines. But it was, you know, those were some really superb, you know, really sort of strong pieces of work that was really about what was sort of happening to real people, you know, at the very sharp end of life. And he really brought that to life. And that's just one of many examples of, you know, great sort of journalism from Community Care colleagues over the years, which has been really great to witness.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So what would you say – I'm going to ask all of you this – what is the best thing about your job at Community Care? Who wants to go first? Don't all shout at once! [0:21:11.1]

Natalie Valios: The team, I would say. I left in 2009 and I was really gutted to be leaving because I thought I'm never going to work with such a great bunch of people again. You can only get that once in a lifetime and people often don't even get that. And when I came back in 2013, even though some of the old team, the two colleagues here, two friends here included, were still there, there were a lot of new people. And again, we've still got another load of new people now. But everyone...it's just still such a fantastic, lovely team, bunch of people to work with, and I feel so incredibly lucky to have had that, you know, second and third time around. It seems to be something to do with Community Care the brand that attracts really great people.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I can definitely second that. I would say exactly the same. Nicky, what do you think? [0:22:05.0]

Nicky Davies: Yeah, it's a tough one because I would have gone certainly with Natalie's view and how she's fed that back so eloquently actually, that the team are magical.

I think for me, other than the team, seeing I need to think of something differently – I feel a bit under pressure now! – but actually, in all sincerity the clients that I've worked with...and when I refer to clients, you know, the people doing that frontline social work, and whether that's frontline social work or they're working in the workforce team or the recruitment team or the human resources team, that have become real friends over, you know, a 36-year career. A many now that I absolutely class now as my lifelong friends.

And I think also, you know, the opportunity of meeting, you know, new people, networking. The amazing opportunities of the conferences and events as well that you have an opportunity to network at and, you know, see colleagues old and new, things like...well, obviously Community Care Live – that goes without saying – but of course, you know the National Children and Adults Social Services Conference we'll be at again this year. You know, just...I think just everything about Community Care and this profession. And I know for many people, many of my clients and colleagues always say, you know, 'Well if you hadn't done this, what would you have done? Surely you would have been a social worker?' And maybe I would have. I don't know if I would have been any good but yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I think you would have been a brilliant social worker. But thankfully you didn't go into social work, otherwise we wouldn't have had you at Community Care! Mithran, what's your favourite bit about the job?
[0:23:52.3]

Mithran Samuel: Well, it's very hard now that Nat and Nicky have said, you know, two things I would have said, obviously! But I really, yeah, like, I suppose, the subject matter that we cover, I suppose. Which I guess is sort of an extension of what Nicky's just said about the sector. It's really interesting kind of...you know, 'cause I guess social work is about sort of everything in life. It's great if you're interested in...I mean, I'm more interested in...I suppose I'm probably more interested in the sort of policy side of things, so you know, I get a good fix of that from sort of, like, I guess, you know, all the policy that comes out on social work and social care. But there's such a sort of human interest dimension to it as well, both in terms of the lives of the social workers and of the people they support. And I think obviously, you know, some of the best work we've done, which Natalie has definitely done some of this herself, has been about, you know, I guess the lives of the people receiving social work support and sort of bringing that to light. Because yeah, you know, social workers work with the people who are probably the most marginalised in society. And so being able to highlight that is one of the, I think, great things about, you know, working in this sector.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I think that's a brilliant answer, Mithran. And also, just to let everyone know, I mean, I don't know if other people call you this, but we call you 'The Guru'! Mithran is the absolutely bible of social work at work. If we don't know anything, which is often the case for me, I'm like, 'Oh, let me ask Mithran.' So...

Natalie Valios: He knows more than Google!

Sharmeen Ziauddin: He knows more than Google, honestly! Don't forget Google! Forget Ask Jeeves. Ask Mithran!

Mithran Samuel: Ask Mithran!

Natalie Valios: If he doesn't know it, no one does.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Absolutely. You know what I find really interesting about Community Care is that – and a lot of people might now know this – but we are a majority female team. And that's really interesting because that is a reflection of the social work sector. Which is not intentional. It's just

the way it worked out. And it's actually really nice to work with lots of women. And men, of course, Mithran! But I think that's quite rare. I don't know. [0:26:13.8]

Nicky Davies: Yeah, I'd agree with you, actually. I think it is. And I do think it's interesting how it reflects the sector. I know again in our latest jobseeker research, again 82% of our respondents were women, and I think that's probably fairly reflective of our team dynamic as well.

I think actually what's interesting about that point is I remember – and I'm trying to wrack my brains to think of the year – but many years ago I attended a National Children and Adults Social Services Conference and it was down in Torquay. And we held a women's directors' luncheon during the conference. And interestingly, there weren't that many women directors or that many women senior leaders then. You know, many years ago. And actually, I think what's really encouraging is how that has also changed and we're seeing more women in those leadership roles within social services teams as well now. So you know, I think that's another sort of interesting change over the years that we've seen.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So I was going to ask, has that happened? So there are more women in those leadership positions, would you say, director of children's services etc.? [0:27:26.9]

Nicky Davies: Yeah, I think I would say. Don't hold me to account on that, but it certainly feels like that. I know that I feel I now speak to more assistant directors and directors of social services that are women. So it feels like that dynamic has also shifted over the years, which for me I feel is really positive.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And any reflections from you, Mithran? [0:27:52.6]

Mithran Samuel: Ah no, I think Natalie and Nicky have said it all. Yeah, probably just to echo what we've all said, really. I mean, I think we sort of feel...you know, I think it sets a sort of value in the job that we're doing. 'Cause I think we're hopefully providing people who, you know, do some of the most important jobs in society with, you know, information and tools and support to, you know, that's hopefully helpful for them in their sort of day-to-day sort of working lives on the one hand, but also perhaps provides them with some, you know, I guess, you know, something that can at times divert them from those lives as well, in a nice way. So yeah, I think we feel a sense of sort of value in doing that or seeking to do that in the job.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I think that's a really nice point to end it on. Thank you so much, all of you. Appreciate your time. And here's to another 50 years!

Nicky Davies: Absolutely. Thank you, Sharmeen. It's been a privilege.

Mithran Samuel: Thanks, Sharmeen. It's been great.

Natalie Valios: Cheers, Sharmeen.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That was Mithran, Natalie and Nicky. Thank you for listening to that very special episode of The Social Work Community.

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