The Social Work Community – Faisa, Transitions

Faisa Abdirahman: Whilst volunteering, the people that we were working with, their crimes were quite significant. It was murder. There was, you know, double murder, armed robbery. But what it's taught me is to also see the human in the person, beyond the crime. And that's the main reason that I pivoted from criminology to social work. Criminology for me was looking at more the criminal and labelling them. For social work, I looked at the person and the crime. [0:00:34.5]

Kirsty Ayakwah: Hello. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, senior careers editor at Community Care. And welcome to our latest 'Career Transitions' episode on *The Social Work Community* podcast, where we speak to social workers about the skills they've been able to transfer from past careers, and how those skills have enhanced their practice.

You were just listening to Faisa Abdirahman, a senior social worker at a London borough council and one of the champions of our network group for social workers called *The Social Work* Community. Faisa initially had her sights set on entering the police force after gaining a BSc in Criminology but pivoted to social work after learning that looked-after children were at more risk of being criminalised in the criminal justice system compared to those that are not care-experienced. According to 2022 figures from the Office of National Statistics, more than half (52%) of looked-after children born in the academic year ending 1994 who attended school in England had a criminal conviction by the age of 24 compared to 13% of children who had not been in care. We'll leave more details about the ONS statistics in the show notes.

Faisa's desire was to see if, by supporting the children and young people earlier on in their journey, she could help to make a positive difference to their lives. Stick with us to hear more about her story. [0:0:02:05.2]

Faisa Abdirahman: My name is Faisa Abdirahman. I am currently a senior social worker for a London borough working with children looked after and the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, including care-leavers. So it's a 0-25 team that I work for at the moment.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And how long have you been a social worker for? [0:02:25.3]

Faisa Abdirahman: So, I started in…well, I started my Master's in 2018 but I actually graduated and got my registration in 2020. So it will be hopefully five years in October 2025.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Brilliant. And I think you've got an interesting story because you weren't always a social worker, were you? What led you into the profession? Tell us more about that. [0:02:48.8]

Faisa Abdirahman: No, many things. But I think the more pivotal moments that led me to social work is definitely the undergraduate degree that I studied, Criminology.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Talk to me about that. Why were you interested in doing a degree in criminology and what happened then after that? Like, what kind of work did you do? [0:03:06.6]

Faisa Abdirahman: I was always interested in criminology, I guess the policing aspect, and looking into that more. So, during my criminology degree I actually did my dissertation on stop and search, and I did get a volunteering role looking at stop and search within the British Hospital Police. And within that role, that's when I started looking at statistics to support also my dissertation, but also my knowledge around this topic, and looked at looked-after children were actually criminalised a lot more significantly than other kind parts and children that are not looked-after or haven't really, you know, reacted or been a part of social care. So that's when I started looking at social work because it pivoted me away from criminology. With criminology, the models we were looking at were more punitive criminalisation and policing. And I felt, 'How can I support these children or young people – care-leavers, unaccompanied minors or even adults – that interact with policing?' and instead of going into that and being reactive, being proactive and supporting them in their journey and in their trauma. Not really at the beginning because children come into care at any time, but being a hopeful and important and also conscious adult in their life that can support them while also interacting with these agencies, 'cause it is very difficult.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So initially it sounds to me that when you did your degree there was an expectation that you'd go into policing. Is that correct? [0:04:37.2]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yeah. Really going into policing, policing agencies, whether that was the Home Office, the British Hospital Police, the Metropolitan Police. That was really always my desire. But again, working…not necessarily working but volunteering with police staff and looking at things inside really out and having more of a subjective than an objective view, which theory or criminology degree didn't give me, really, I guess, gave me that passion to be at the other side and again, not being that punitive professional and supporting them.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So you did do some volunteer work with the police, didn't you, to get an idea of where you wanted to go with your career but as you explained then, 'cause you wanted to work with children a lot earlier in that journey. [0:05:25.4]

Faisa Abdirahman: My undergraduate and also the volunteering led me to social work. I also volunteered with an organisation called Safeguarding of Vulnerable Adults. The voluntary organisation we were working in prisons – well, volunteering in prisons – I was there as a mentor for two years as part of my volunteering, and that really gave me more insight into working with those that have gone to the prison system unfortunately, and are at the end of their sentence, to also have a mental health diagnosis. And with this volunteering I also found that looked-after children have a higher population as adults and children in youth offending institutes and prisons, and that also gave me the

insight and the reasoning why I wanted to switch from criminology to social work.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So how easy was that for you to make that transition? Did you speak to social workers and they're the ones that told you maybe this is a career for you? [0:06:21.3]

Faisa Abdirahman: At that time I didn't, actually. I wasn't really aware of social work organisations. It wasn't a world to me. I was more in the knowing of criminology. Even the word 'safeguard' was quite new to me as a new adult. I didn't really know about that role or that word. I didn't know you had to do a degree to become a social worker.

For me, I started doing some research myself, looking at how I can become a safeguarding practitioner, work with children and young people, and that showed me social work. And it did show that I'd have to either do, at that time – because I wasn't aware of the other internships that I can do now – either a Master's or a Bachelor's. And that's why I decided to do a Master's. And then I found a Master's fast-track course at Middlesex University for 14 months that would qualify me to work with children and adults who need safeguarding. And that really was the pivotal moment for me.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Mm, I can understand that. I'm just thinking about your time when you were volunteering in these spaces that are, I guess, sometimes pretty violent. Would you have come across social workers? Or would you have any sort of interaction with people working in that kind of supportive role? [0:07:35.8]

Faisa Abdirahman: At that time I did come across a multi-disciplinary team. I know there were forensic psychologists on there and support workers. But I wasn't aware or wasn't informed that there were social workers. So I was of the view that they were missing from those spaces. But pretty quickly I learnt actually social workers do also work in both prisons and youth offending institutes, and that also led me to look into the study further.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And you talked about the high incidence of people who are looked-after, young people that are looked-after, and they find themselves in the prison system. Were there particular points or elements of how they're supported or not supported that means that they end up in these spaces? [0:08:21.0]

Faisa Abdirahman: Then it was quite peculiar when I was looking at the statistics and looking at this population and thinking, 'Well why is that?' But again, retrospectively, for me now working with the young people that are in the prison system, multiples times from early adolescence up until adulthood and again, for me it is the lack of trauma-informed care, both in the community and in the services that they interact with, whether that's the mental health services, support services in the community and also health services, unfortunately. And a lot of symptoms are missed, unfortunately, and there is the understanding or though amongst community and society that trauma and healing is easy. But it's not linear and it doesn't go away. It manifests in different ways. It grows, it changes. And that, for me, on reflection, would be the reason why these young people continue to, unfortunately,

reoffend and are pulled and pushed into criminality. Because it is a risk factor, a significant one.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And something that resonates with me that you mentioned earlier about supporting young people a lot earlier in that journey and you being able to do that potentially more effectively as a social worker. So, apart from working or volunteering in the police service, was there anywhere else that you worked while you were doing your social work degree? [0:09:58.8]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yeah. At the beginning I looked into working with young people and those that are looked-after more closely. And that's when I came across, for the first time, semi-independents. Before then, I didn't know what they were or what those homes meant.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So semi-independent accommodation? Is that what you mean? [0:10:17.6]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yes.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So could you just define what that means, just in case people aren't aware? [0:10:21.5]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yeah. So, semi-independent is basically a home for those aged – it depends on really the home – either 15-21, sometimes 16-21. And this is for young children and young people that are thought to have some level of independence and transition from either their home, foster home or a children's home. So this is the bridge before they actually become a care-leaver, and to support them with their independent skills. So that means cooking, budgeting, managing their own appointments and really looking into their education and work if they're not in those spaces already.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And what was that experience like for you working in that environment? [0:11:08.7]

Faisa Abdirahman: It was eye-opening. I looked at the system that children operate in a lot more closely. I found that some children and young people unfortunately do not have the required skills to be in that setting without support. And when I mean support in these spaces, more typically I've seen, whilst working there and also being a social worker, young people, young adults that are there are supported by at times either one or two support workers. And this is still young people with needs. So they're coming from children's homes where there is more of a staff and children ratio, and they're put into what is meant to be a transition home but without the significant support that they've had for a few years. And also transitioning out of foster home and being in the final setting.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And you were doing that alongside doing your Master's, is that correct? [0:12:14.1]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yes, I was. I was basically doing the evening and night shifts to support the young people after my lectures were over. So it was pretty hectic. But what I also found in these homes, due to, unfortunately again, the lack of support for these young people, they were still the vulnerable children that were in children's homes and

now found themselves in semi-indepedents. So the vulnerability was still there and even more heightened would be my view. And again, a risk factor for extra-familial harm, whether it's child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and modern-day slavery, because again they don't have that consistent support network and at times are left to their own devices for many reasons. These are looked-after young adults who are informed that they are here for their own independence. So it's trying to strike that balance as support staff with, 'How consistently can I support you and where are your boundaries?' because they're also being told different messages. 'You're here to build your own independence but I'm also going to have to support you to go to your appointments or have to support you to go to college.' And sometimes they don't understand that and aren't able to accept that support. And really and truly, because the support is quite inconsistent – one day there may be two staff members, on one day there might be one staff member so whereas yesterday this support staff was able to really support me more significantly and more closely, the next day they're not able to do so because there's not enough staff – and I think that continual pushing and pulling in that home does create more of, I think, pain. And more trauma.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Mm, I hear that. And also something else that I'm hearing, you mentioned your working as a support worker, which meant that there'd be a limitation on what you're able to do in terms of statutory requirements. You're not a social worker at that point. So I guess – and please tell me if 'm wrong – did you feel like if you were going to be able to support these young people better you would need that qualification to do it? Is that why you became a social worker? Was that like another additional thing? [0:14:48.0]

Faisa Abdirahman: Partially. Because as a social worker now, you do have a lot of discretion and a lot of decision-making. So you would be able to go to these semi-independent homes and support the young people in how you and they feel would be their best fit. So I feel in working in semi-independents, I was able to see how things worked at a more closer level where I can, and have, used it as a social worker to again go to these homes and see, 'What is the staffing level like? What support would my young person have on a day-to-day basis?' Not Monday would be one support and the Tuesday would look different. So that knowledge, I think, was quite powerful. I was able to now request for key-working sessions, 'What is my young person doing Monday to Friday? Have we supported them with budgeting? How far are they?' Because working in these homes, unfortunately again, with the lack of staff you're not able to do these key-worker sessions. You're not able to do the one-to-one support. And again, being a social worker with that knowledge of then being able to know and see, 'Is this home and level of key-working support appropriate for the young person?' So that experience, I think, was key in my journey of social work and wanting to be a social worker.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Mm, okay. And I feel like you've responded to this already but what do you feel like you've been able to take from those previous voluntary and paid roles as a support worker? What have you been able to take into your social work, if you were to name, like, three

things that you've been able to transfer from being in those other scenarios? [0:16:38.8]

Faisa Abdirahman: That's a really good question. Thank you, Kirsty. On reflection, three top things that I think I have learnt and continued in my social work journey, number one is that trauma and pain and healing isn't linear. That will continue in the young person's life. You may see how they're interacting with you in meetings or maybe at school, but when they're in their home, in their room, you may be seeing different sort of things and different sort of faces. And there is a lot of masking going on.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So how do you tackle…? Sorry, that's just really interesting. So how do you tackle that? I mean, it sounds to me like because you worked as a support worker you're more aware of that. So when you became a social worker you had that knowledge. So even if you're seeing somebody presenting positively and happy and all of that stuff, you're aware that maybe they're dealing with other things privately? [0:17:37.7]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yeah. No, definitely. I think what it's taught me is that, as a social worker, not to always praise and look at the young person turning up or the young person engaging with school. Because although these statistics are very important to us and school is important, a young person turning up is important, not placing importance on that nor their level of engagement, and also taking things as they are. And with that I've learnt it's one day at a time. Yes, Monday may be great. Tuesday is a completely different story. Because maybe what had happened on that Monday night at their semi-independent home when we weren't there, because we're there from the 9-5. And looking at the 24 hours as a whole and giving that young person grace. If they don't turn up, they may turn up. But messaging them and continuing to let them know that you are there, you do care for them, you do see them, and to some regard you do have that care and compassion for them, I think that's what I've learnt definitely from the semi-independent and what I'll continue to take with me as a social worker.

Kirsty Ayakwah: That's really powerful. And I feel like that can also be reflected in your time volunteering in that prison space as well. Because I think when people think about young people and criminality, they're not thinking about the trauma that they've experienced and actually why they're doing it. [0:19:00.9]

Faisa Abdirahman: And whilst volunteering, the people that were in prison we were working with, their crimes were quite significant. It was murder. There was, you know, double murder, armed robbery. But what it's taught me is to also see the human in the person, beyond the crime. And that's the main reason that I pivoted from criminology to social work. Criminology for me was looking at more the criminal and labelling them. For social work, I looked at the person and the crime because with the person and the crime, it tells you a lot more than that. I think with a lot of young people, not just the looked-after population but the [unclear – 0:19:43.7] population in specific…just want to survive and unfortunately due to that decisions are made. And at times, unfortunately, that decision was made because of the exploitation that they're facing and the literally day-on-day battle that they're having

with themselves and the services around them. Because all we hear…and I would do as a social worker in these meetings is feeling that you're failing at school, you've not turned up to this meeting, you know, your room is a mess, you're not budgeting. And if this is sort of all you're hearing all day long in different meetings or by different people in a very harsh manner because they are adults and you should be telling them about themselves, so to say, unfortunately you do cause a lot of turmoil and internal conflict that you may not see because they're masking.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah, I see that. I mean, I can imagine if you're just constantly being told what you haven't done, then why should I even try? That might be a feeling, you know. Honestly, that's really powerful, and I really get a sense of why you're doing that. I can hear in your voice the advocacy that you have, like how you're advocating for these young people. And I'd like to find out what keeps you in social work now. You've done it for quite a number of years now.

Faisa Abdirahman: Yeah.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And you're a senior social worker. What keeps you turning up for these young people? [0:21:14.8]

Faisa Abdirahman: I think, I'll be honest, I've asked myself that question many a time, especially when you're stressed. There's a lot of transference, you know.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Sorry. When you say 'transference', you're talking about the emotional? [0:21:27.3]

Faisa Abdirahman: Yeah. I've asked myself that question many times because there's a lot of emotional transference in that role. We know – we've seen the statistics – there is the negative media about social workers and there is the burnout. So I asked myself, you know, 'Faisa, what does keep you in that role?' when I reflect or when I'm driving home from either a very significant and different day for the young person – because I don't want to take that away from them – or other situations.

What, for me, keeps me in social work – and like I've said, I've asked myself many a time – is the young people and the change that you do make in a year, two years, due to the consistency and seeing the inner child in that young person or that young adult, or even their parent, that are reliant on your and you're relying on them to build that relationship and make that meaningful change. And when I talk about meaningful change, I think I refer back to what I've said – growth and healing and trauma isn't linear. It continues. And that's not to say that you will be a change-maker and you will have a magic wand and everything will disappear. What keeps me in social work is, I think, you may not make change now but that young person may actually remember you – maybe negatively, maybe positively – but you'd have some sort of impact. And that's not to say the 'I told you so' social worker. It's the 'remember this' as a social worker. And for me, who I'm thinking about now is a young person and she definitely changed my understanding and thought as a social worker. And one thing that I would always take away when I do reflect and think, 'Do I still want to be a social worker?' is her words of, 'Keep being a social worker.'

This was a young person particularly that wouldn't want to speak to me. It took more than six, seven months. But what she taught me is, 'Are you going to keep turning up?' And she was seeing and looking whether I was going to turn up. And I did. And every time I turned up, because she didn't want to speak to me I would always write letters and just put it through her door. And what I think I reflect on and I remember now is she didn't want to speak to me but she kept those notes, she kept those letters, even if it was, 'Hey, I hope you're okay. Hey, I've come here today, wanted to see you.' And I think the young people that you work and interact with don't know that you…they change also your meaning and your thoughts forever, both personally and professionally. Because again, we have parts that we mask and we come into the profession and with them again you change things personally and hopefully one day, when they are in that age and they're looking for jobs, being that professional person and turning up for themselves continuously, irrespective of what they're going through because the interactions that keep me going is, 'You matter. You may not see it. Others may not see it. But you matter.' And I thought, 'If that's the only thing I can instil in a young person…' They get what I'm saying. 'Yes, you've not gone to school for six months. You've missed your GCSEs. But turn up for yourself. You can always do these things again in life if that's the path you cross.' So for me, I think that's what continues my social work journey, even when I said, 'I don't want to do anymore.'

Kirsty Ayakwah: That is so inspiring. And I do hope that people who are listening who may not be social workers but they may be support workers, they may work in a semi-independent or a children's home and they've maybe thought, 'Could I do what Faisa's talking about?' those skills are the skills that you cultivated from previous roles when you weren't a social worker and you've been able to take that knowledge and that skillset into social work and make a difference. So I'm hoping that those that listen to this can maybe take something positively out of it and pursue a career in social work if that's what they choose to do. [0:25:45.9]

Faisa Abdirahman: Oh, definitely. It is a career that, again, changes you, I would say for the better. And that isn't to say I'm undermining the deep difficulties that we have as practitioners, but to hold that and use that and see how you can make meaningful and impacting change because it isn't easy. It won't ever be easy. But experiences, knowledge, change does make it easier and does make it worthwhile.

But I would also say for the social workers – and this is something that I've learnt as I've continued with this journey – is to show up for yourself and to also give yourself grace. We give it to the young people, we give it to the people that we work with, but give yourself that grace as well and listen to your body, listen to what you're feeling. Think about, 'What do I also need amongst this chaos. Do I need some time off? Do I need to stop and think? Do I need five minutes of reflection? Do I need a break?' You absolutely do. And give yourself that or it may break you. And you don't want to come into a role that will break you. But these are the important steps that you should definitely be taking.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Really sound advice there. And I think, yeah, it's hard to do sometimes when you feel like you're firefighting. But I think you're right. You know, if you have the support system around you as well, if you have a good manager, a good team, time for supervision, all of that helps as well.

So yeah, Faisa, thank you so much for your time. This has been really insightful. And I hope that other people will be able to learn and feel inspired after listening to this.

Faisa Abdirahman: Thank you so much and thank you for having me.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thanks for listening to this podcast episode. If you' enjoyed Faisa's story, you can read more about her and her work as a community champion on www.thesocialworkcommunity.com, our gated community network where we share social work careers guidance. Also, why not check out some of the other podcasts in our Community Care library? We have the Community Care Inform podcast series, called *Learn on the Go*, where expert practitioners and academics discuss what the latest research, theories and practice models mean for social workers. These podcasts are available on our platforms, and also on Spotify, Audible and Apple. You can also connect with your social work peers on our Instagram page. Connect with us @communitycareofficial. Thank you.