

Supporting social workers to flourish in their careers

(Kirsty Ayakwah) Hello and welcome to 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 Commercial Editor at Community Care, and in this episode, we introduce you to a new three-part miniseries in collaboration with North Lincolnshire Council's Children and Families Service that explores career progression, well-being and social work practise. In the most recent 2022 Ofsted inspection, North Lincolnshire Council's Children and Families were rated outstanding in all areas, with inspectors citing an exemplary commitment to children as one of its strengths.

The Council's Grow Your Own approach contributes positively to the service's succession planning, and a focus on supporting social workers in their preferred continuous professional development pathway has resulted in a highly motivated, enthusiastic and loyal workforce, the report says. In this episode on career progression, you'll hear from two practitioners at different stages in their career. Rachel Smith, who started her career at North Lincolnshire over 20 years ago, is now Director of Children's Services, and Louise Stretton, who has worked across a number of teams including Disability and Child Protection in her 13 years at the Council, and is now a Lead Officer in Family Help. They talk about how they have been supported to grow their careers. Rachel kicks off the conversation.

(Rachel Smith) So Louise, we've known each other a really long time now since you joined North Lincolnshire, and I can remember when you first came for your interview many years ago, but I want to have a conversation today and to talk through your journey with us in North Lincolnshire, and what you would share about that to other people who are potentially thinking about joining North Lincolnshire, or thinking of a career in social work.

(Louise Stretten) Oh yeah, yeah, I remember that interview as well. Actually, it just feels like it was so long ago now, but when I came to that interview with you, Rachel, I'd already been working at North Lincolnshire for four years, and that was in the Children's Disability team, but it was something I really wanted to do, moving into the Child in Need and Child Protection team, just for my own development and progression at that point in time. That was, like I said, that was around seven years ago now that I moved into that team, and it was pretty huge.

I remember we were all based in the same office down on Church Square. We were all on the ground floor, weren't we? And I remember coming in on that day and meeting all the social workers who, I think the one thing that stood out for me at that point in time is that everybody knew each other, so there were various different teams on that floor, but all the practise supervisors and managers were there as well, just alongside of us. So actually, getting to know my team and the people who were supporting me as someone who was new, that was a real big bonus.

(Rachel Smith) To be honest, that's still the same now, isn't it? Yeah, except for on the top floor at Church Square instead of the ground floor.

(Louise Stretten) Yeah, and the offices are a bit nicer now than they were back then, because they're beautiful now, aren't they? But that's one of the big things that's really helped me in my journey, is that you guys have all been around and available to us.

(Rachel Smith) I think, yeah, I think it's really important, isn't it, in terms of knowing each other and when you get to know people, you know, when things, people might be having a bit of a not-so-good day and you pick up on that and you can check in with people and you create those relationships, don't you, which are really important in the jobs that we're doing.

(Louise Stretten) Definitely, and I remember it then as I remember it now, was that I was brand new back then, and I can't remember, would you have been a service manager, Rachel, at that point in 2016? I think you were, but to me, that wasn't any sort of barrier to learning or asking questions, because you were there and available, and there's some particular children and families I can remember just saying, I don't know what to do, or what do you think about this, and there was always somebody to ask, including yourself, which is still the case now.

(Rachel Smith) I was going to ask Louise where you are now in your career, so I know where you are, but would you share that with people in terms of starting out children with disability, into social work, child need, child protection, and where are you now?

(Louise Stretten) So I'm one of the lead officers in the child in need and child protection team. I've been in that role for around 18 months now, I'd say. I came into that role when we were, I remember I was practise supervisor before I came into the lead officer role, and in all honesty, I didn't think I was ready for either one of those roles, and I remember, actually, it was my practise supervisors and managers at the time who, as part of our one-to-ones and conversations, really encouraged me to think about what were the right next steps for me, and yeah, with that encouragement and support, I was able to apply for those positions, essentially, and yeah, I'm really glad I did. So yeah, I would say that that's one of the strengths of North Lincolnshire, that I've seen firsthand, coming from a newly qualified social worker into the team, through to now where I'm a lead officer, that actually my individual strengths and ability to grow has been valued, and I've felt supported. It's really, really good, and it's important that you felt that way, and then you can support people who are starting out as newly qualified, and it's a privilege as a manager and a leader then to grow others and to see their career progression.

(Rachel Smith) So that's what you're doing now in your lead officer post, isn't it? So now you're working with new people who are starting out in their journey, and students as well. So you support a number of students as well, don't you?

(Louise Stretten) Yeah. What was it like for you, Rachel? Did someone ask you to apply for the next job, or what happened from when you were a social worker?

(Rachel Smith) So I started out as a volunteer, so I knew I wanted to go into social work, and that came from personal life experiences, thinking about wanting to be in a system to help children and families.

So I started out as a volunteer and then worked as a casual residential worker in our children's homes, and then went on to university. And at that point, I actually wanted to go into youth justice. So I knew with having a social work qualification, it opened so many different doors.

So it's not just about child need and child protection, it could be different avenues, and I thought I wanted to go into youth justice. And then I started out on my placement here at North Lincolnshire in January 2006, and it was in the children care team, and I absolutely loved it. And when I was embarking on my social work career, I didn't actually realise the volume of different roles that you can work in across the system, because there are so many different roles within social work.

It isn't just one. And then I moved throughout my career from students, a social worker, team leader, service manager. I was in the PSW role for a period of time, which I really enjoyed, loved working with the workforce team and thinking about continuous professional development, how we grow our workforce.

It was just something that I really, really loved. And then moved into the assistant director, and then more recently into the director of children's services in December 23. So I've had quite a long, well, all my career has been in North Lincolnshire in various roles, and I wouldn't change it.

It's been absolutely brilliant. And I do think that along the journey, there's been different things. My confidence at times has not always been where it should be, or I've questioned myself.

But with the support of the organisation, support of good managers, good leaders, and people invested in giving you the opportunity to grow is really important. And that's why it's important to me to make sure that my workforce feel that as well, because we're here to do a job for children and families, but we also need to feel looked after ourselves as part of the workforce, and to feel that we're given opportunities to grow, and to keep our passion alive, and to try different things, and to move into different teams. So I think my journey has shaped how I also want my workforce to experience it as well, because mine's been really rich with different opportunities.

(Louise Stretten) So I think one of the really important things for me listening to what you just said, Rachel, is about how we all support each other in North Lincolnshire. And it doesn't really matter which team you're in, we're all working towards the same things, our children and families, that we want the best possible outcomes for them. And they're our kids, essentially, that is how we all feel that we are responsible, and we care, and we will do absolutely anything and try and think outside the box to support these children and their families.

And I'm not from North Lincolnshire. And I know you are, Rachel, aren't you? I'm not from North Lincs, but I genuinely feel connected to North Lincolnshire. I don't live too far away, so I do travel into North Lincolnshire every day, but it feels like a community that I'm part of, because I've worked in North Lincolnshire for such a long time.

(Rachel Smith) But the values and what we're trying to achieve really is important to me as a practitioner, but that is felt across the workforce, in my opinion. It's really good to hear. And I think the other thing, Louise, is that I know that you car-share sometimes, don't you?

(Louise Stretten) Yes.

(Rachel Smith) Although you don't live in North Lincolnshire, and you're coming to work here, you do car-share with some of the other workers here, don't you? And that helps with reflection and journey, cuts down your fuel costs, et cetera, because actually you're just coming together in the car. And I think that's really good. It's a good opportunity, really. And I think what you just said, you don't have to live in North Lincolnshire to work in North Lincolnshire. And we do have lots of people that live here, but people that don't. And I think that it's more about feeling part of the community of the organisation and the community of the children and families we're working with. So it's really good to hear.

(Louise Stretten) Yeah. North Lincolnshire is quite a small place in comparison to other local authorities, but that definitely has its advantages in terms of we know our population, we know our families, we know what they want and what they need, and it really matters to us. It's the priority, really.

(Rachel Smith) I think I would agree, Louise. And I just think in terms of knowing our children, knowing our families, and knowing our partners as well is really important. I went to a recent opening event at one of our hubs for our care leavers, and one of our older care leavers, older than 25, was there that day, and she was volunteering. And I knew her when she was 13, and now she's a mum with two children, and she was supporting our care leavers. The other staff knew her. So there was a head of service there in a different workforce. And so the longevity of relationships is something that's really key here, to not just longevity of relationships across us as a workforce, but with children and families. And I think that's really important because you can see the journey our children have been on into adulthood, and it was a pleasure to spend time with her that day. And I know she got a lot from it as well, reminiscing.

(Louise Stretten) I think that's a really nice thing to hear. And it actually makes me think about numerous other examples of parents and families that we come across in different circumstances in years to come.

And I remember an example. I don't know if you all know Rachel, but one of our family support workers who'd been here a really long time.

(Rachel Smith) I did hear about this.

(Louise Stretten) Yeah. She got a call years and years after working with a family from a grandma who she'd supported as a mum. Now, this grandma's lived in another authority now, and she just rang to ask for some advice because something was going on in her personal life.

And it was just a call out of the blue after many years, but that's just one example of how those relationships really matter to us and to those families, because she was more than happy to take the call. This is a bit out of the blue, but really nice to hear from you kind of thing. Yeah.

(Rachel Smith) I did hear about that, Louise. And do you know what I thought about that situation? It's really great that this grandma now reached out to the support worker that she'd worked with years ago as a mum herself. But I heard about it on, we call it shop floor, the office where everyone was sat, and there was just a sense of pride, and pride in terms of that grandma had now reached out.

But the support worker, she was beaming, wasn't she? That she'd obviously meant such a difference to this person all those years ago, that when there was some trouble going on in her life right now and some difficulties, she rang her, and everybody was really touched by it, weren't they? So it took time to just recognise that it was really special.

(Louise Stretten) Yeah, definitely. Did you ever see yourself becoming a DCS from everything you've just told me about? You've obviously been in the job about 20 years now, more than. So did you see yourself get into this position?

(Rachel Smith) No, I didn't actually, Louise. I think that when I started out as a social worker all those years ago, really content in the roles that I was in and never really thought I would ever, ever, I didn't dream of becoming a DCS. It kind of evolved into it as I progressed through my career and different opportunities arose.

I was supported to go into different roles, et cetera. So it wasn't something that I thought I would be doing. But I think that one of the things I see now as a privilege is to support the workforce, to support strategies, develop the plans, and really make a difference for children and families at this level in the organisation.

So didn't really see myself there, but love being here and love seeing the workforce and them growing as well. So yeah, it's a privilege. Louise, you're a lead officer now. I mean, I know we spend a lot of time together, don't we? But you've been in the role about 18 months and you're doing fantastic. Where do you see your progression? Where do you see yourself next? And I know we talk, don't we, around it's not always about climbing the ladder and going into higher posts, areas of interest. What is it you feel like you might want to do next?

(Louise Stretten) Well, I feel like there are lots of different things that I might want to look at, but also that I'm encouraged to look at those different opportunities as well.

So one of the things that I've been supported to do recently is my level five management training at Hull University. So that's been something that's been really useful to me thinking about this current role because there's a jump, I think, from being a practise supervisor to being a lead officer where, yeah, you're trying to be a leader essentially, which is really different to managing. There's lots of parallels and same bits that come over them, but actually trying to find my feet as a leader right now and influencing the workforce and how we work with children and families is really big for me right now and finding my feet within that.

But one of the things I've got a big interest in and I'm being supported to explore is our working with harm outside of the home. So in terms of career progression, if you like, I'm not necessarily at the moment looking for a jump up to the next level or anything like that, but it's really about looking at different opportunities and my own professional development and understanding how we work, like I said, with exploitation and modern day slavery and all those issues that come under that umbrella really. And actually there's so much to do in that area, but I'm getting a lot of support from other partners and managers who are much more experienced, but also being given the opportunity to be part of developing what that's going to look like in North Lincolnshire as well.

So for me that's the next thing really.

(Rachel Smith) I think that sounds fantastic Louise. I think what you're talking about there is cementing your experience in the lead office, I suppose, feeling comfortable, confident, growing, doing the management course, but also looking at areas that are really interesting to you and actually where you might invest more time to learn more because that's really important to have variation within your role, isn't it? That sounds like you're really enjoying it at the minute.

(Louise Stretten) Yeah, and I think that thinking about the variation in the role, so in our team at the moment we've got lots of newly qualified social workers in the recess year of employment alongside those who are much more experienced and the practise supervisors, and clearly we're talking to them and looking in their one-to-ones about what's next for them, and some of those what I'm finding is a number of the practitioners and practise supervisors do want to step up, if you like, into management positions or senior management positions, but there are also a number of practitioners who've got a wealth of experience and knowledge who really want different opportunities.

So a bit like what I just said about the harm outside the home work for me, we've got social workers who are not necessarily wanting to be managers, but they may have a special interest in working with babies or pre-birth assessments and we've got a number of opportunities to meet with partners and develop what our offer looks like, or it might be that they want to get involved with supporting students, so passing the practise educator course and things like that, so I think there's a lot to offer depending on what your own personal situation or interests are.

(Rachel Smith) I think what you've just described there Louise, which is really important, is that it's unique to the individual, so there isn't just one path, there isn't one process that actually, depending on what you're interested in or where you see yourself developing, that it's unique to you as opposed to there's one plan and that's where you go from social worker to manager.

Actually, some people do really want to remain within frontline and have opportunities to do lots of variation within their role and that's really, really crucial and we retain that experience in frontline by giving people lots of different opportunities and I think whilst we're talking about growing our own and we're talking about the different routes and different routes to different roles actually, growing your own is also about investing in maintaining people in frontline but giving lots of different opportunities to grow their continuous professional development and I think that's really important.

(Kirsty Ayakwah) Thank you for listening to this, the first of three episodes in our podcast series with North Lincolnshire's Children and Families Service and listen out for our next episode with North Lincolnshire's Children and Families where team members will be talking about how the council prioritises well-being and helps its workforce to achieve a positive work-life balance and in the final episode, team members discuss how the practise model, the one family approach, is shaping the council's ambition to keep children in their families, their schools and their communities.

To hear more content like this, please visit www.communitycare.co.uk and listen out for our next episode with North Lincolnshire's Children and Families where team members will be talking about how the council prioritises well-being and helps its workforce to achieve a positive work-life balance and to find out more about career opportunities at North Lincolnshire, visit jobs.communitycare.co.uk and type North Lincolnshire in the space bar, bye for now and to find out more about career opportunities at North Lincolnshire visit jobs.communitycare.co.uk and type North Lincolnshire in the search field, bye for now.