

How direct work is transforming how children are supported

Hayley Smith

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Kirsty Ayakwah

(0:16) 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.

(0:27) My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, Senior Commercial Editor at Community Care and you were just listening to Hayley Smith, Advanced Social Worker in the Children's Assessment and Safeguarding Service at North East Lincolnshire talk about one of many ways the local authority has transformed the service.

(0:45) North East Lincolnshire's children's services received an overall good judgement in its recent Ofsted inspection with one outstanding judgement on the impact leaders have had on social work practise and supporting children and families.

(1:02) According to Ofsted inspectors, North East Lincolnshire's whole service transformation has left children's services largely unrecognisable from where it was in 2021. These changes are felt in their practice approach and in the authority's commitment to safeguarding children and young adults.

In this episode, listen to Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services and Hayley as they reflect on the impact these changes have had on themselves, the wider workforce and particularly the children and families.

Ann-Marie Matson

(1:38) So Hayley, here we are. I think it's almost two years since I joined North East Lincolnshire as Director of Children's Services.

It'll be two years in December. What an incredible two years we've had and I think you were one of the first social workers I met when I came to the team. And in that two-year period so much has happened, so much has changed and in the middle of all of that we've had Ofsted join us.

(2:03) How's things been for you over the last couple of years and you know predominantly before that as well, Hayley?

Hayley

(2:06) Well I've been in the local authority 20 years, social worker for four years and I think the rapid change that we've seen since you came to North East Lincolnshire and an amazing leadership team that we've seen such a transformation and we've got such a shared vision

now that didn't exist before and we've got such a stable workforce that we all feel secure and supported and able to support our children.

Ann-Marie

(2:31) It's really really great to hear that because one of the first things we did was to think about our workforce and our workforce being absolutely our biggest asset. And we launched a workforce strategy which was predominantly aimed at recruiting social workers to join North East Lincolnshire and practise social work and create the changes for children that we all wanted to see. How's the workforce feeling Hayley from your perspective?

Hayley

(2:57) I think to walk into the office every day and see familiar faces and have a consistent supervisor just encourages you every day to go out and do your best and be able to come back and offload and talk to people because you've built and established them relationships. Whereas I think we went through a period where you would walk in and you wouldn't know who you were sitting next to and you wouldn't know which manager you were going to get that day so to have that consistency has really supported us.

Ann-Marie

(3:25) It makes all the difference doesn't it having access to good quality supervision, first-line management and senior management as well in terms of that safe practice.

Hayley

(3:36) Yeah and I think the investment from the senior leadership team that they want to come out and they want to do visits with us. And they talk to you about individual families and they're really bought into this and it really empowers you because you know that as well as you as a social worker knowing your children that the whole leadership knows your children. And it might just be an off-the-cuff conversation about how did they do this week? Did they manage to go to school, did they get to that activity and I think that really builds trust in both the workforce and the wider community.

Ann-Marie

(4:08) Absolutely, 100%. I mean fundamentally part of our pace of change, our transformation journey was all about us, the togetherness, the partnership, not just from a children's services perspective, but across the whole council, the whole community and most importantly and the experiences of our children and young people running through everything that we were doing in terms of creating practice change. But also strategic change and that ownership at every level in terms of some of the things that we've launched so for example we've recently launched a direct work toolkit. So the toolkit was a whole breadth of different tools aimed at all-age children with various levels of need ranging from helping children understand their identity to live journal work to helping children make sense of living in conflict in families and roles and responsibilities. And how's that feeling in terms of using that with our children and young people?

Hayley

(5:04) Yeah, I mean the toolkit's something that every social worker can go to, can look through and any scenario or situation that that child's-facing we can find something that we can do with them. So it might be a paper exercise, it might be colouring, it might be picking out different buttons to represent people in their families. It might be drawing a roadmap to understand their life journey but it's so diverse. It works with children who are verbal, who are non-verbal, it can be a standalone piece of work, it can be something that runs over several sessions. And I think for every social worker in North East Lincolnshire to have access to that it's just amazing and to deliver that when we've got new starters, students, for them to start their career going out with direct work is just amazing.

(5:56) I love direct work, I love every day going out and seeing my children, seeing my families, having that toolkit to do that direct work. Knowing that that's really feeding into making changes for children. Being able to share that, you know, come back and say, oh I did this piece of direct work with somebody and I got this really good outcome and maybe you could utilise that. So I think it's been so beneficial and I think direct work now in North East Lincs runs through us like a stick of rock whereas before it was very standalone and quite an add-on to our work, now it's fundamental to every piece of practise that we do.

Ann-Marie

(6:27) It was great, one of the visits that I had the privilege of joining you on, Hayley where you were using one of the direct work tools and seeing that being played out firsthand was just a beautiful moment.

Hayley

(6:39) Yeah, we were talking about communication, so we just did an exercise where everybody had a piece of paper. And I was getting you to draw what I was describing, and the drawings were very, very diverse, very, very different. But it just really gave that key message to that family that what they're saying isn't always received in the same way and that sometimes we have to amend our communication and we have to reinforce things. But it was just a really fun activity and to see them, the different pictures at the end.

Ann-Marie

(7:08) Yes, I think my picture was most interesting.

Hayley

(7:11) I think what was amazing about that session was to take the director of children's services out on visits with me and to engage with them families and to see that running through - to see you know our assistant directors, our deputy service leads, our practice supervisors going out and really engaging with families is something that I've not experienced before and it's not scary.

(7:36) And I think that's the thing you might think oh my goodness I'm taking out my director of children's services but actually I feel like we really bounced off each other and for the family. It was that visibility of the leader coming out and really engaging with that family and it's been amazing. And they still ask now when I go out on visits, oh how's Anne-Marie doing?

Ann-Marie

(7:53) Oh that's so lovely to hear and it's an absolute privilege from my perspective, Hayley to get the opportunity to see firsthand the quality of practice and I actually think it's a must for every manager.

(8:08) I think it's really important that no matter what role you're in you don't lose sight and connectivity of the importance of good quality social work. And yeah I'll certainly remember that visit for a long time to come.

And when we're talking about direct work and the direct work toolkit one of the things from our perspective is the impact of direct work and what difference it makes to children's experiences and lives. And I know Hayley you've got some real firsthand observation and feedback about the direct work toolkit.

Hayley

(8:38) Yeah, I mean I had a child who was in care and we did some direct work around what was important to them and they had an upcoming baptism and it was really important for that child to be able to attend that and we facilitated that. We ensured that that child was able to attend but it was their voice that really drew that out that they wanted to attend and they needed to attend as part of their journey, their journey actually to rehabilitation and reunification back home. So I think had we not had that piece of direct work and really understood the importance to that child we wouldn't be where we are now.

Ann-Marie

(9:17) I think what's beautiful about that Hayley is it absolutely aligns with our values, the culture that we're creating in relation to children having every opportunity to be within their own families and their own networks and their own communities.

(9:32) So one of the early things that we considered about 18 months ago now was the practice model in North East Lincolnshire. So the model in which binds us on how we deliver practice to children, young people and families. And taking into account the views of our workforce and the experiences that our children were having, we took the decision to completely relaunch a new practice approach and fundamentally at the heart of our practice approach is relational based practice.

And we've been on an incredible journey over the last 18 months in relation to how we value a relational approach in everything we do with children, young people, families. But equally with each other as a workforce and how we behave towards one another in that relational way. And I know certainly from a frontline practice perspective that's been absolutely critical in terms of seeing some of the change that we've seen.

Hayley

(10:26) Yeah I think we've had such a shift in that you know we're no longer writing that term that a family won't engage with us. That the onus is on us as practitioners to go out and engage the families and really being given that opportunity with a lower caseload to be able to take that time to build that trusting relationship with a family, acknowledging that this is a really difficult time in their life - someone coming in and intervening and that we're really relational and we show empathy and understanding and awareness of what that family is going through to really build them trusting relationships with our children our young people and our families. And then bringing that back in into the office and building relationships with our colleagues and the wider community.

Ann-Marie

And I think it you know it runs through us. It's everybody's responsibility, it's everybody's business and creating a borough of belonging where children young people at the heart of absolutely everything, has been a real privilege to be part of.

And I think another important aspects of that is how at all levels - strategically operationally everybody's role has put the views and experiences of young people at the heart and centre of everything we've been doing. And making sure we all use and take those opportunities to capture children's voices to capture their experience. And open ourselves up to be challenged in relation to what they have to tell us about what's happened before. But most importantly, how we can continue to move forward and help them get the best.

Hayley

(11:59) Yeah and I think we're all working to the same ethos now 'our children our future' and I think that everybody who comes into North East Lincolnshire and wants to be part of children's services have to sign up to that. And I think you're right, you know that's from the very top level all the way through the offer that we've got in the partnerships that we've got that this is our children who will be our future and we all need to buy into that.

Ann-Marie

Absolutely, and even politically, you know, a real goosebump moment for me was when every politician cross-party support in relation to introducing and adopting protective characteristics for care leavers. That was a real signal of not only you know as Hayley's described from a children's services council partnership perspective our children our future but seeing that firsthand in the council chamber 100% support for protective characteristics for care leavers and what that means to them for the rest of their life is a massive step forward in terms of our the journey that we are on here together in North East Lincolnshire.

(13:10) So ultimately what protective characteristics means is that care leavers - so protective characteristics for care leavers we will work really hard as a council and as a partnership to ensure that any inequality is identified and addressed. So practical things for care leavers will include things like support into employability. So from helping them write a CV to getting them job ready to the council about to launch the family enterprise scheme where care leavers will be prioritised for council jobs.

It will mean that we are committing to care leavers being at the heart of our housing strategy across North East Lincolnshire. Not just from a suitable accommodation but the quality of accommodation. So looking at all aspects of their lives to make sure that we know where there are gaps of inequality which we know that there are in relation to care leavers health employability housing making sure that they get the help and support throughout their life to get that equal opportunity as any other young person or young adult would get and Hayley I know from a social work perspective I know you know the team have been incredibly excited about what this means in reality for young people.

Hayley

(14:36) Yeah I think it's so important you know one day you're 17 the next day you're 18 you know and there's a day's difference between that and it's really important that we invest and we support our young people who have been care experienced to have them opportunities that every other child gets so that we do support them with appropriate suitable good quality

housing, that we really support them to thrive in education employment whatever path they want to choose that they're supported to do that that we rule out some of that inequality and we really include our young people that have experienced care.

Ann-Marie

And there's lots going on isn't there we're about to launch our family enterprise programme from a council perspective which as I say it's incredibly exciting in terms of what that will mean for care leavers in North East Lincolnshire being given opportunities for employment and training that they've not previously had it's going to make such a difference to people's lives into adulthood.

Hayley

So we've had such change in the last two years, but we all know that we're not at a stop sign we're at a giveaway sign we need to keep going. So what's next Anne-Marie where are we going next?

Ann-Marie

Oh that's a really big question Hayley. I mean you're absolutely right from the Ofsted perspective that was a point in time a marker in the sand we're only just at the beginning of our transformation journey despite how much we've done, we still want to go so much further on behalf of our children and young people.

And I think what's next for us for us as a council for the partnership for the community is that we will absolutely be pledging and committing to continuing to hear what our children and people are telling us about their experiences and using those experiences. And where we know we still need to improve because we know that to make sure that our strategic landscape is reset refreshed, relaunched our priorities are re-looked at and we continue to build on the amazing progress that we've seen.

And my commitment to the workforce is that you know we will continue to co-produce collaborate with our absolute children's views at the heart of everything we are doing.

(16:38) Incredibly excited to think about the work we're doing in relation to inclusion and how we adopt the approach of a borough of belonging and what that means for children young people into the future.

We're about to see our horizon youth zone (16:53) open as we edge towards the Christmas period (16:56) again that's a really exciting time and the opportunity that's going to bring (17:00) for every child in North East Lincolnshire and that is (17:04) internationally groundbreaking opportunity for our children.

(17:07) So it's a it's a youth offer fundamentally it's a youth offer multi-diverse multifaceted range of physical practical emotional activities for children aged 5 to 25 with SEND and care leavers massive brand new state-of-the-art building sports centres in the heart of our town centre.

And absolutely going to bring opportunity for children to have fun for children to play for children to make friendships social connections which in turn we will hope to see that those social emotional developments are stronger children's outcomes at the other end of that are much improved and ultimately we just want our kids to have fun.

(17:55) You know growing up in the current climate it you know can be really challenging and particularly with the IT world and what the youth horizon youth zone coming to Grimsby which when you look at our population size it is the biggest in the country - born out of council investment but also business investment and community investment and fundraising so it's a horizon youth zone that belongs to the children of this community that the community have fought hard and continue to have on our pack.

Hayley

(18:25) And I think for us as well it means that for children who have a social worker due to a child in need plan or a child protection plan that there's a community that's going to wrap around that child when they no longer have a social worker - that they've got a place in the middle of town that they can go to and they can access all of that physical social emotional support that will just continue to keep them safe and build on their life experiences.

Ann-Marie

(18:48) it is absolutely fantastic to see and to see it being built from within our town and getting the opportunity to see those bricks going up.

(18:58) and how children have contributed different school trips designs as a children's voice group that are meeting in terms of designing what the programme should look like children will get the opportunity for a hot meal you know there is that absolute commitment for this to make a real difference to our town that you know we know it's had its struggles over many many years North East Lincolnshire.

And the timing you know it does feel like the stars are aligning for children in North East Lincolnshire not just from a children's services perspective but the whole council the whole community the time is now for Grimsby - for children North East Lincolnshire this is your time to shine.

(19:36) it's a massive signal of children young people you are heart and centre you are the future of this borough you are everything to everybody.

(19:46) The Ofsted outcome is a point in time and I think we've talked you know really openly as a team about it being a marker in the sand and what comes next for children young people but right now. How does it feel for you Hayley how does it feel for you and the team.

Hayley

(20:02) I'm so proud to work for North East Lincolnshire I'm so proud when somebody says to me what's your job and I can say that I'm a social worker in North East Lincolnshire I'm so proud to hold that title and it's because of the leadership team that allow us to be proud.

And allow us to share our achievements no matter how big or small we're encouraged to share that within the office and with our partners and more publicly.

(20:28) And I'm absolutely so incredibly proud of every single one of you you absolutely have permission to be proud.

Kirsty



Thank you for listening to this the first of three episodes in our podcast series with North East Lincolnshire's children's services.

If you'd like to find out more about working with North East Lincolnshire Council, please visit Community Care's jobs page on jobs.communitycare.co.uk/ and search under North East Lincolnshire Council.

(21:02) And don't forget to listen out for our next episode with members of North East Lincolnshire's integrated front door team as they talk about how they improved workforce efficiencies bolstered multi-agency co-production in their bid to deliver high quality help and support to children and their families bye for now.