

Prioritising workforce wellbeing – one council's approach

[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.

(0:28) My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the Senior Commercial Editor at Community Care, and you were just listening to a snippet from a sound bath session that North Lincolnshire Council organised as part of a recent Wellbeing Day for its workforce in children and families, ensuring that practitioners have access to wellbeing support and flexible working arrangements and the chance to network with the wider workforce through staff engagement events are areas that North Lincolnshire remains committed to.

(1:00) 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 report cited that manageable workloads were enabling practitioners to practise relationally, spend more time with children and families and give practitioners a space through personal supervision to explore the impact workloads are having on them.

In this, the second instalment in our three-part miniseries, in collaboration with North Lincolnshire Council's Children and Families Service, we speak to Heidi Blakey, Senior Workforce Engagement and Development Officer in Children's and Families at North Lincolnshire Council, and Marco Torres, Apprentice Social Worker in the Courts and Permanence Team, about how the council prioritises wellbeing and helps its workforce to achieve a positive work-life balance. Marco kicks off the conversation.

[Marco Torres]

(2:06) Hi Heidi, how have you been? I know that recently we've had our Wellbeing Day. How did that go for you?

[Heidi Blakey]

(2:12) It was incredible. I think we've had a good number of months planning for the Wellbeing Day and it's the first one that we've done in Children and Families that's been dedicated and we've done it as part of our Workforce Month to celebrate our whole Children's and Families Service, everything that you all do on a daily basis, to showcase internally what we do and externally, and having a chance to focus on and dedicate on our wellbeing in order to support our staff, because fundamentally for us, you're all the backbone for our Children's and Families, so I think us being the backbone for you is crucial.

(2:48) Throughout the day we had, you missed out to be fair Marco, we had sound baths, which for me, I've never done a sound bath before. Have you done one?

[Marco]

(2:57) No, I've heard of them, but I've never actually experienced one. What's it all about?

[Heidi]

(3:05) So the sound bath is something that I'd actually been led to from a Pilates instructor, and we also had Pilates during the day as well, and knitting and a silent book club, which that was a beautiful room to be in.

I think one of the staff members just said that the silent book club was bliss. But the sound bath, everybody, you lay down or you sat down and you had an eye mask on, which for me felt quite, initially I was a little bit uncertain about how it was going to feel because I was like, right, okay, I need to not take this off and I'm surrounded by colleagues, how's this going to be?

(3:37) But the session started with loud drums, kind of like church bells kind of drumming, which went round the room and every person kind of reacted differently to it, but I nearly fell asleep. And the whole purpose of it, I think, with the drumming and the chimes and the sound therapy was allowing us all to kind of go into a deep relaxation.

Yeah, it was good. It was calming. I mean, if we do it again, which hopefully we maybe will, you'll have to make sure you're on one of those.

[Marco]

(4:04) I was about to say.

[Heidi]

But it was good. Everybody came out of it feeling quite relaxed. And it was a good way to start the working week with it being on a Monday. And I know for us, it's part of a bigger picture and looking towards 2026 in addition to other wellbeing things that we're doing. And as you know, Maka, with the staff engagement events that we've done, which we've been doing since last year, we've introduced this year doing a kind of a movement meditation session at the start of each staff engagement event.

(4:37) How have you found the staff engagement events?

[Marco]

Yeah, I have taken part in a couple of them. And I'm really excited that, you know, we're here in North Lincolnshire, we've started doing the wellbeing days. I think my experience with the staff engagement sessions have been really positive.

(4:51) I think they're really relaxing. And, you know, I personally am quite a social butterfly. So, you know, I enjoy company with other people and chatting to other people and get to know new people that I don't know, especially when they are my colleagues who sit across the desk from me.

(5:04) And I think it gives us an opportunity where, you know, we're so busy and we get so caught up with our work that we can easily forget the purpose and what we're really doing and why we're doing it. So, I think these staff engagement sessions are so fundamental to sit back and reflect. And when you think you're probably not doing enough, it's there, it's right in front of you.

(5:24) And, you know, hearing from our directors and directors and sort of higher ups to get to understand the progress that we are making as an authority for our children and families as well is really important. And then on top of that, you know, getting to liaise with our colleagues and build relationships with them as well, I think it's really important, you know, and I think there's an impact in my wellbeing, I can say for sure, around how I feel afterwards. You know, I remember walking away from one of the events feeling like, you know, such an achievement and such progress that had been made.

(5:56) And I found it absolutely fantastic. But I think for me, the main thing out of the staff engagement sessions is that ability to reflect and sit back and realise that actually, we do really, really well as an authority.

[Heidi]

I think what you were just saying, Marco, is really, really important.

(6:14) And I think at the staff engagement events, we've tried to create them and they're continuing to evolve as we move on. And as we get feedback from the workforce, because ultimately, that feedback is crucial to us in order to try and shape these events the way that our workforce wants to see them.

(6:34) But we have a movement session at the start, which is voluntary, which we're actually getting more and more people coming to those, which is amazing.

And we do tend to lead into a bit of breakfast, don't we? Which I think always is popular. As part of the staff engagement events, we've launched this year a Let's Connect feature. And this was from feedback from staff on wanting to know what other teams do.

You know, our children and family service is massive. There's hundreds of us that work in this service. And everybody's doing inspirational work every day of the week, but we don't necessarily know what other people are doing.

So we've dedicated space at these engagement events to introduce teams. And we've had the youth counselling service, we've had our neurodiversity teams. And I think, from my perspective, I don't know about you, Marco, they seem to have gone down quite well.

[Marco]

(7:22) Yeah, I would absolutely agree. They've been really, really popular and really successful as well. I think, you know, working for one of the teams within our service, I think it's that ability to sort of show other services as well.

You know, this is what we do. We're here. We may be a small team, but we're here and this is what we do. And our work is really important, as I'm sure every other team in our authority is. And I think it's that ability as well, and having that pride and being proud of the work that you do. And almost showing that off to your colleagues as well and saying, you know, this is what we do.

And it's absolutely fantastic. So I do, I do really enjoy the Let's Connect feature that we've started bringing in as well.

[Heidi]

I think the other one, the other feature we've had at the staff engagement events is the shout outs, which the shout outs have developed from our, we had our sort of internal gold star awards, didn't we Marco?

[Marco]

Yeah, we did.

[Heidi]

(8:10) Which have kind of progressed a little bit. But do you want to tell us a little bit about how they, how the gold star awards were shaped?

[Marco]

(8:14) Yeah, so the gold star was what I found that was really, really good. And I did look forward to every Friday, the first Friday of every month.

So, you know, it was roughly 12 o'clock. We would all gather at Church Square House, the top floor. And then the lead officers would have sort of a list of people that had been nominated by colleagues and managers for their best practise.

(8:33) And for other things in general that they have done, there were achievements that needed to be praised by not only your line manager, but everyone in our service. So, you know, that the lead officers would gather, everyone in the office would gather around a table all together and we would celebrate that person achievement. It isn't just a tick box exercise of, you know, Marco Torres gets an award.

(8:52) It was about, you know, this is the reason why and this is the reason why it needs to be celebrated and the reason why it's so important. And then backing that up with the impact that it had on that child and children and that family. And I think that that was huge.

(9:08) And I am so glad to see that, you know, although we're moving away from the Gold Star Awards, we're going into something much bigger, which is obviously the nominations at the events, which I think still shows that celebration of not only teams in North Lincolnshire Children's Services, but also specific individuals that are going above and beyond for our children and families as well.

[Heidi]

(9:29) I mean, I love seeing the shout outs and the nominations coming through. And, you know, for the next event coming up, we've got hundreds that have come through and we've got so many we're having to put them on a film style credit reel, because if somebody stands up and reads them out, we might be there for the full two hours just listening to shout outs.

(9:46) And I think even for me, it's like it's really like a proud moment to read them. And I feel quite privileged that I get to read them before they're then shown at the event. And I think it just reinforces what you were saying, Marco, about like having that confidence and that pride, because I think it's easy to say that it's a one-family approach at North Lincolnshire Council, but it really feels like it.

(10:09) And every member of staff are really incredibly passionate about what they do for our children and our families in North Lincolnshire. And I think our well-being and our flexibility in order to support that is it's crucial. And I think it's something to celebrate.

Like you say, it's every member of staff is to be celebrated for what they do.

[Marco]

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's so easy to talk about well-being, isn't it, and throw the word around.

But actually, I believe the well-being comes from the people that we work with. And, you know, we're the social workers, at least, you know, we're the people going into the homes of, you know, our children and families. And we can either be this really bad character for them, or we can be a light of hope for them, you know, and they are going through one of the most difficult times of their life when they're having a social worker knocking at their door.

And I believe that we need to be a light of hope for them. But at the same time, how can we look after people if we can't look after ourselves? And I believe that starts in-house. And, you know, here in North Lincolnshire, I think we do that really, really well.

(11:10) You know, we're looking after our well-being, and we're supported by managers and higher-ups. And that well-being is promoted every single day through and through, which allows me to look after myself and promote my own well-being, which then means that within my practice, I can promote that well-being with children and families that I support every day.

[Heidi]

Yeah, absolutely.

(11:30) And I think I echo that, and it's that team connectivity. And I think our teams are close, and we all work together, and you're there to support each other on good and bad days. Even if it's like, let's go downstairs and have a coffee.

Let's go outside and have a walk. Let's have that 20 minutes away from the screen, and then we'll come back to what we're dealing with. You know, because we know there's intense times.

We know there's stressful points and traumatic issues that we're dealing with, particularly with yourself in some of the cases that you'll be around in your team. And I think it's that that well-being comes from a variety of avenues, and we also get that well-being, I think, from the children and the families that we work with. When we see one of our young people that's maybe been in care, and they've developed, and they've got themselves a job, I take a sense of pride knowing that I've just been a little bit of that journey with them.

(12:17) I mean, I think Marco you've got an example of that, haven't you?

[Marco]

(12:22) Yeah, absolutely. I mean, some people may say something so small, but I know how huge it is for this young person in this family. And for myself, a 16-year-old, selective mute, chooses to not speak to anyone, doesn't engage in education for three years.

He's now 16, and I've recently been informed by college that he's attending every day. Like, that's huge. Like, I remember going home that day when I was told, with a big smile on my face, my partner said, like, why are you so happy? And it's those little things that actually, again, when we're from wellbeing in there, that's a huge impact.

(12:54) That little thing has had a huge impact on my wellbeing, because for me, it gave me the energy to keep going.

[Heidi]

And I think we all need that, don't we?

And I think it's a focus for us, is trying to ensure that all of those pieces are pulled together. Like, it's a jigsaw, isn't it? And I think we've got to have that overarching council strategy that's helping us with our wellbeing and our flexibility, which involves the annual leave, and being a fostering-friendly employer, and the pension benefits, and flexible working arrangements.

But then we've got our teams that are working in certain ways, which develop dependent upon the team that we're working in. And then we've also got the children and the families, and how we all interact together. If we then add on our development with the wellbeing day and the movement sessions, and those engagement events, which, whilst not mandatory, we look forward to people coming to, hopefully, we're living that one-family approach.

[Marco]

(13:46) Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's what I really like about North Lincolnshire as well, it's that flexibility. And I know that people often see the term flexible working, and I think they automatically assume it just means you can start work a little bit later, and then you're working later into the evening.

And that's not what it necessarily means, sort of a face value. I think at North Lincolnshire, we sort of look beyond just a service or a team, and we look for the specific individual. And every single person will have that flexible working at different levels.

And it's about the people that you work with supporting you, ensuring that you're meeting your own needs at your own pace. I know that if I've just dealt with something really, really challenging and really, really difficult, and I need to take a minute, I can just go and take a minute for myself. And whether that is I go for a walk, like you said, or I just sit on my phone for five minutes, or I just ring my partner and just have a chinwag, you can do those things because you're looking after yourself.

(14:38) And that I believe that there is a lot of trust within our authority as well, which comes from all of that relationship-based approach, doesn't it? And I think that it really does support that wellbeing, knowing that you trust the service that you work for, and that service trusts you back.

[Heidi]

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, that's fed through the regular supervision, which takes shape of wellbeing conversations, excellence conversations, one-to-ones.

(15:06) And I think yourself, Marco, you have further supervision, is that right?

[Marco]

Yes. During the supervisions, you can easily fall into the tick box exercise of supervision, can't you? You know, we're here to talk about this case, tick box done. And I think what we've really got at North Lincolnshire is looking beyond that, and, you know, how are you doing? How is life for you in general? And I'm not talking just your work life, that's not all I care about.

How are you doing as a person, as a human being? And that is promoted and encouraged throughout, and it's acknowledged at all times that you're not just payroll number, you are a person, and that's really encouraged at all times. And, you know, the ability to sit with your line manager or your senior and say, you know, this is how I'm feeling, and this could be the reason, and really just let it out and reflect and think outside the box and have that person listen to you and not make it about them, it's all about you. It's really important, because I think speaking to someone is one of the most powerful tools that we have as human beings.

(16:01) And I'm glad that we get that regular supervision due to that case, because, again, you know, when we're talking well-being, it's all there, isn't it? And every little thing plays a huge part into how you are today as a person.

[Heidi]

Yeah, absolutely. I think it's that, like you say, having that trust and that autonomy and that confidence in who we're working with, that whether it be a colleague or a manager or a senior, that we can actually go, no, I'm not feeling okay today, and the reason I'm not feeling okay is because of this.

And if you're feeling endorsed to share something personal, that it's not just discarded, it's listened to and it's appreciated, and it's like, right, let's find some, we are finding some time to talk about this, let's figure it out together. And I think it allows us to put families first.

[Marco]

Yeah, I don't know if you'll agree, Heidi, but coming into social work, I definitely came in with this idea of, you know, I leave my personal life at the door, it stays in the car with me, and then I'll pick it up at five o'clock.

And you know what, like, I've come to learn that I can't do that. I need that. I need my personal values.

I need who I am outside of work in my job as well. Like, because that those values, my personal values impact my day-to-day work, and I need them in order to make sense of the situations that I deal with, and to gauge different situations. But also, if I was to leave the way that I am,

you can forget the relationship I have with a parent, because I will then turn into a robot, and I think that's so important.

The reality is, as social workers, you can't do that. You need who you are, because that is your biggest resource to do your job well, and to support children and families.

[Heidi]

(17:34) Yeah, absolutely. I fully agree with you on that. I think it's easy to say, oh yeah, you can switch your personal life off, and then you've got your work life, but no, it crosses over, and I think it absolutely should cross over. Yeah, there's certain points in the day where you're going, okay, I've now got to switch off my mostly work brain, but you still might have something about your family, or something that's happened going through your head.

[Marco]

That's it, and I think with what you've just mentioned, I think it all falls down to caring. We care so much, but actually, when we're thinking wellbeing, how can I care about this child, or these children, this family, if I don't know what care looks like for myself? And I think when we then think of the bigger service, when you're being cared for by a service, a service is looking after you, you then have a purpose of caring for your job, and your caseload, and the family, and the child that you're supporting, and I think you can then fall into this cycle. Actually, if you've got that foundation, you can just achieve and have success.

[Kirsty Ayakwah]

(18:25) Thank you for listening to this, the second of three episodes in our podcast series with North Lincolnshire Children's and Families Service. If you missed our first episode on career progression, we'll leave a link in the show notes. Our next and final episode with North Lincolnshire's Children and Families, we'll be discussing how the practise model, the one family approach, is shaping the council's ambition to keep children in their families, in their schools, and in their communities.

(19:01) To hear more content like this, 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.