



### Transcript:

#### WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK

#### Lisa Curry – Children and Families

Narrator: In Tameside, near Manchester, senior practitioner Liz Currie is arriving for another day in Denton's children's social work team. After starting her career in the voluntary sector, Liz has been with the Tameside team since 2008.

Liz Currie: Coming to Tameside, because of the way that we work here we don't have a separate duty team, we don't have a separate looked after team, the area team does everything, and I wanted that very steep learning curve, and I wanted to get experience of all the different areas. And I like that style of working where you take something from the beginning and follow it all the way through, and build up those relationships with the children and the families.

Narrator: Liz can have around twenty or thirty children on her caseload at any one time. Today's shift starts with a voicemail from a twelve year old boy living in a children's home; he is unhappy and wants to leave. It is Liz' role to try to listen and to manage the problem. It may mean reinforcing the boundaries the young person needs to follow.

Liz Currie: He is struggling there at the moment because a new young person has moved into that children's home and he is really struggling to adjust to that. Generally when he rings me up it is because he is not getting his own way, and he is hoping that I will change whatever decision has been made.

[Phone call] *What's up, what's been happening? Now if you need some time out of that situation you can go off down the park or whatever, and then come back at an agreed time.*

He wasn't entirely happy with me, he did put the phone down on me a number of times, which he tends to do when he doesn't hear something that he wants. I spoke to him and spoke to staff to work out what was happening, and what rules they were putting in place for him; because equally we need to support what they are doing, but make sure he understands what they are doing, but also find a way out of that situation so that he and staff aren't ... he isn't winding them up and getting annoyed, and they aren't having to manage that all morning.

Narrator: With the situation stabilised Liz will keep in close contact with the staff and the young person, to try to ensure the placement can continue. But her next case can't be dealt with over the phone; she has received a referral from another professional whilst on duty, around suspicions that a twelve year old boy with learning difficulties may be involved in sexual activity and substance abuse.

Liz Currie: We need to know whether parents know about that, and what the supervision level is for the child. Also, having spoken to the child, he was very clear that there are a lot of people living in the house at the moment, there is a lot of arguing going on at the moment, and he is not actually very happy living there.

Narrator: Liz and family support worker Paul Wayne need to do a home visit to investigate their concerns.

Liz Currie: *I think what we would like to happen is to be able to sit down and have a discussion with mum and dad about where they think things are up to with the child at the moment. How they think they are getting on in terms of supervising him, whether he is sticking to boundaries, because that has been a problem in the past. We need to establish whether or not they are supervising him adequately, and whether they would understand what the risks would be of not supervising him.*

Narrator: Visiting children and families in the community is a crucial part of their child protection work.

*Ideally we don't want to do it unannounced because obviously it is quite disruptive and rude to the people that we are visiting to just have social workers banging on the door. But equally if there is a concern that has been raised by another agency about the child then we will do unannounced visits.*

*Hiya, I am Liz from the children's social work team.*

FS: *Hello.*

Liz Currie: *Are you alright, this is Paul.*

I think home visits are one of the most useful parts of job, in terms of engaging families and in terms of assessing and understanding what is happening. I think the situation when you get some people to come into the office and talk to you is a totally false situation, and you are not getting a true picture, you are just getting what they want you to know. Whereas if you see them at home you are seeing them dealing with things that they can't particularly control all the time. The understanding of what it feels like to be that child, what experiences of being parented is this child having, what is there life like day to day.

Narrator: As with many unannounced visits, it can provoke a strong reaction towards the social workers.

*We went in and spoke to mum. She was a bit upset, she called dad in and he was really ...*

- Paul: *Really upset.*
- Narrator: *... yeah, he was really upset, he was quite angry; he struggled to stay in the room because he was really quite angry, so he went out. Well mum stayed and talked to us, she has agreed for a worker to spend a bit of time with him, and work out what his wishes and feelings are, what his view is of what, if anything, has happened.*
- Narrator: With at least one parent open to support Liz will ensure the family receive the correct help to put effective supervision in place. Back in the office Liz rushes into a multi-agency meeting about a separate case; a teenage boy is causing concern.
- Liz Currie: The difficulty, I think, is that everyone has a lot of concerns, but no-one has a lot of evidence about the concerns, so we get quite a lot of people being worried about the child and saying things like, well I think this is happening, but nobody knows. The youth offending team have expressed some concerns about what is going on for this child at the moment, and we are going to look at what information they have, whether it is information we have had before or not and what the basis of that information is.
- Narrator: It is a case that Liz knows well, and despite the lack of evidence her experience and intuition always told her that something was not quite right. Effective social workers need to apply professional scepticism to cases like this.
- Liz Currie: Mum says exactly the right things, and I have no reason to disbelieve here other than I have a feeling that she is not telling me the truth, or that she is telling me the party line. But you get some parents who have got years and years of working with the system, and getting rid of professionals, and they are very good. And she is very good, I am not disputing for a second her skills at getting rid of me, she is excellent at that. I think my intuition has held this case open, actually I think we could quite easily have said several years ago, they are not engaging let's shut it.
- Narrator: New police information supporting her intuition is revealed in the meeting, and Liz believes she may need to escalate the case into a formal child protection conference. First she must discuss the evidence with team manager Tracy Rowe.
- We have got a lot of new information from police that I wasn't aware of. The police say that mum spends a lot of time in the evening in the pub; they are saying they have been round and she has been intoxicated.*
- I think we are supported really well, I think one of the things I really like about this authority is the high level of support and the opportunities for discussing things. I read something saying that all intuition is biased, to some extent it is, so I would say if you are having intuition as a professional, you responsibility to examine that and think about, what am I reacting to here, and working with managers can help you explore some of that. There are very few facts, you are on the hypothesis, you are on the, well I have got this

information that leads me to think this, and that doesn't mean that I believe that thing a hundred per cent, that means that at the moment my information leads up this way, and there is a possibility that I might be wrong, there is always a possibility that I might be wrong.

Narrator: Team Manager, Tracy, agrees that Liz should consult the conference team to take the case forward, as the new evidence clearly supports her initial concerns.

Tracy Rowe: You don't just pull it from thin air, it is your years of experience, it is your training, it is your knowledge. You may not be able to put your finger on what it is that is not quite right, but you know it is something that you do get more confident to rely on, and you get more confident in looking for what is it that is not feeling right. The majority of the time when people say it is not quite right, usually it isn't right, and when they explore with other professionals – they talk to other agencies, like health or education – it backs up that feeling really.

Narrator: After lunch at her desk, typing up the morning notes, Liz is back on the phone in the afternoon dealing with various children, professionals and foster carers. A teenage girl on Liz' case load is struggling in a new placement. The foster carer is concerned about how to deal with contact with an older sibling. It is Liz' role to provide ongoing advice and support for the foster carer to ensure the safe care of the child.

*[Phone call] She is not supposed to see her sister unsupervised at the moment because of the concerns about who her sister is associating with. She could have put her in contact with people that are inappropriate and people that could sexually harm her, sexually exploit her. We are not convinced that she would be safe, and our responsibility is to keep her safe, now if she goes against that and runs off to see her sister then you need to report her missing.*

I think she is a really good foster carer with younger children, but I think she does struggle with teenagers, and the young person is quite a difficult challenging teenager. WE can't have the young person who is in our care put at risk like that, so we need to keep her safe; which we have explained to this young person, but equally she is not that fond out boundaries and she tends to challenge, so she may well challenge that.

Narrator: It is now mid-afternoon, and Liz is back on the road, on my monthly home visit to fourteen year old looked after child Paige. A month ago Paige briefly ran away from her foster carers. Liz has been working with Paige for two and a half years, and wants to make sure these current issues have been resolved.

*She wasn't very happy last time I saw her. She was fine by the time the visit had ended, but things were disrupting a bit at the time, so I need to go and see her and see how she has been since then, see how everything has been going for her.*

*Hello.*

Paige: *Come in.*

Liz Currie: *Thank you.*

Last time I saw her she had just had the blip, it was the day when she had come back from doing a runner. I need to see how it has been since she got back, how is she feeling, is she feeling, is she still happy in the placement, is she still having feelings about wanting to leave; because sometimes she does, and I think that's natural. I also think, particularly teenagers, quite difficult and quite a lot of teenagers say, I don't want to be here anymore, but when you have got the option of not having to be there anymore that magnifies it and makes it worse.

*I saw your mum the other day.*

Paige: *Did you?*

Liz Currie: *Yes, have you spoken to her or something?*

Paige: *I phoned her. When I stayed at her house that night she only had coke and cream soda on the side, she wasn't drinking.*

Liz Currie: *Yeah.*

Paige: *Which was pretty good.*

Liz Currie: *But overall you have been getting on alright with Maria and Kevin?*

Paige: *Yeah, made friends with them.*

Liz Currie: *Good.*

Paige: *Yeah fine.*

Liz Currie: She was eleven the first time I met her; she has gone from being a quite sulky, quite difficult young lady into, she is absolutely brilliant now. She is lovely, does brilliantly at school, does really, really well, she is working above average, teachers love teaching her, a hundred per cent attendance, participates in lots of activities, wants to go to college, she is great, she has done so well, the change in her is amazing.

Paige: I have known her for about two and a half years I think, and at first when I first got put in care I didn't like her at all, because I thought it was her fault, and she was saying that my mum was a bad mum and all that. But I think now I have actually grown up I can understand where she is coming from when she says that my mum, she is not a bad mum but she couldn't look after us; I understand now.

*Part of my assessment when I go isn't just what she is telling me verbally, it is what she is telling me with her behaviour and how she appears. It is nice when she is in a good mood and she seems really settled; she was clear that she getting on really well with the carers at the moment, that the blip they were having last time was just a blip and that is fine now, and she has moved on from that.*

Narrator: Having ended the visit on a positive note, Liz returns to the office to write up the case notes. Her job can be filled with emotional highs and lows, and she is constantly aware of her responsibilities to the children and families that she services.

Liz Currie: Taking children into care is an extremely difficult thing to do, and I think that is right, I think it should be, I think it should have an emotional impact on you, and you should question it. It is never a decision I would make, it is a decision that we make in consultation with managers and senior managers and the legal department. It is very final, and the courts describe it as a draconian measure, and it is, and seeing how distressed the parents are is upsetting, it really is upsetting.

I like it when children start to trust you, and I also like it when we can see good outcomes for children; we can see them perhaps things change within their family and they are a lot happier at home, or they are settled in foster placements and they are a lot happier there. And when you see a child that has gone from, say, kicking off at school all the time, terrible school attendance, and then you see them perhaps living in a foster placement, and wanting to go to school every day, and thinking about a career, and thinking about a future, you think well that actually if that child had stayed at home that wouldn't have happened. And the fact that now they have got more choices is because of something that we have done.

The other thing that I really like is how well everyone gets on as a team; our team is really close and supportive, we get on really well with people from other agencies, and it is actually a really nice atmosphere to work in, and I really like that.

[End of Recording]