

Above My Pay Grade

By Sarah Hughes

ZOOM BING SOUND

Hiya. Can you hear 'uz? You can? Ah good.

I'm Michelle Haynes. I get 'Chelle for short. I'm from South Shields. Erm... I'm 34. Not that that matters like; how old I am.

God I sound like I'm on Blind Date or Take Me Out or something don't I?

Uhm. I'm a support worker, for kids who've just recently left the care system and are transitioning into living independently. I'm not meant to call them kids like. They're clients, or 'service users' I think that's the preferred name for them at the moment. But they're always just kids to me. Babies really.

Anyway; me manager Julie, she kind of twisted me arm to speak at this Workplace Well-being event. And I wasn't really keen, but Julie said I'd be able to give a good insight into how much the last 18 months have taken their toll. On the staff, as well as the kids. The service users. Sorry.

So, I'll apologise in advance if I waffle on a bit. I'm not usually one for public speaking. I'm just glad they changed this so it was on Zoom to be honest. If I'd had to stand up in the Civic Centre in front of you all I think me legs would've given way. Oh and I'm also apologising in advance if I get interrupted by my son. He's on his third isolation this term bless him, because someone not even in his class got Covid. Apparently they had a shared play-time, outdoors, last Thursday. Honestly! Anyway, I've heavily bribed him to just leave me in peace for an hour... so fingers crossed!

Right. Ok so. I thought I'd start with how I felt, how I think we all felt, in that week before the first lockdown actually happened. For me; that was the scariest bit. You could see what was happening in Italy and Spain and France. Northern Ireland, they were ahead of us as well weren't they? You knew it was just a matter of time until they closed the schools and told everyone they needed to stay inside. It felt like a really bad 80's horror film. I was quite panicked if I'm honest.

And at work we were just scrambling. Desperately trying to think of ways we could help the kids before everything closed down. There were a lot of tears in the staffroom. I think I worked probably 60 hours in the week before the lockdown. Every night when we left the office I went to the supermarket and got whatever I could, then went dropping it in for the kids in their flats. I just desperately wanted to make sure they had enough food, enough supplies you know. I was one of those mad people buying all the loo roll. But it wasn't for me.

Erm so with our service, whenever we start working with a young person who's coming out of foster care or a children's home, we really focus on getting them ready to move into their

own place, we do loads of stuff to help them prepare. Budgeting, you know, how to pay bills, how to do a weekly food shop, wash their clothes, how to clean the flat.

But how could we have prepared them for that situation? We never saw it coming. Well nobody did, did they? I just felt sick, sick to me stomach knowing how alone those kids were going to be.

I personally, was frightened enough at the start of the lockdown, I was waking up in the night, bloody palpitations, anxious as hell. And I had my husband and two children to lean on, to take comfort from and have a cuddle when I needed one. Those kids were completely alone, you know. It absolutely broke me heart.

Anyway. It came didn't it. The lockdown. March 23rd wasn't it. And I almost felt relieved when they just did it and all the speculation died down. We were in it now.

And I think at work, we kind of felt galvanised. We knew we had to get a grip and find new ways to support people.

So we created this big timetable of activities on zoom. Bloody Zoom. I know people got a bit zoomed out by the summer but thanks god we had it really. So we did loads of online bits and bobs... Bingo, they all loved that. Fitness classes, quizzes and stuff.

We had to beg borrow and steal laptops and ipads like. Well, not actually steal, but you know what I mean.

I'd never heard of the term 'digital inequality' before but believe me, it's a thing. All these online activities were cropping up left right and centre, and our kids were like "ipad? I haven't got an iPad man I can barely manage to buy me food shopping."

I kept looking at my own two children. And it was stressful, homeschooling them, and dealing with all of their anxieties about this weird new way of life. They're 7 and 8. A boy and a girl... and they fight like cat and bloody dog. We could've technically sent them to school because I was classed as a key worker. But I just felt it was the right thing to do to keep them at home. Not because I was worried about Covid particularly, but because I felt so sorry for their teachers. No PPE for them was there? I used to laugh when they said on the news that the schools were closed. They certainly didn't look very 'closed' did they? The world and his wife were bending the rules to send their kids into school and I thought it was a bit of a joke to be honest.

They were ok anyway, my two. They missed their friends really badly, but they were kind of set up to succeed you know? As much as any kid could be at that point. They had two parents at home, albeit desperately trying to get on with work. They had endless snacks (most of them totally unhealthy), security, love... and they had internet and iPads. Both of them. One each.

Remember when Jeremy Corbyn said he'd make sure every family in the country had internet access? And everyone laughed at him didn't they? Said it was a stupid policy. Aye well it didn't seem so stupid when you were looking at a caseload full of teenagers without internet or devices in the middle of a worldwide lockdown.

But we sorted it. We got devices and internet hooked up for every single one of them. I'm really proud of that.

And we did have some great laughs on those zoom sessions, in the early days. It was a novelty wasn't it? We did a fancy dress one Friday night and I dropped daft stuff off for them all to wear. It was lovely to see them smiling.

(CHILD'S VOICE : Maaaam!)

Oh god - sorry that's me son shouting from next door...I think it's fine, he's gone quiet again he must've remembered I'm on this call. Sorry.

Erm right where was I up to? (SOUND OF PAPER SHUFFLING) Oh the zooms. Yeah the zooms were really fun...

But switching off at the end of the session was always so hard. I just wanted to reach through the screen and hug them. These kids, they'd already been through so much in their lives you know... you don't end up in care for nothing. And now they were dealing with this, in a little bedsit, on their own. I found that element really hard emotionally, I couldn't switch off those thoughts.

(CHILD'S VOICE: Maaam! I need you!)

Ee I'm so sorry to do this can you just bear with me for one minute while I just check he's ok? I'm sure he's fine but I better check. I'll pop meself on mute.

(Mute button sound/ping?)

(Door creaking open followed by Michelle's voice further away)

(Michelle's voice: Charlie! What the hell is the matter?)

(Charlie: Nothing's the matter...)

(Michelle: well what are you screaming for me for then? You know I'm on this call and I told you you absolutely were not to interrupt me under any circumstances!)

(Charlie's voice: But I've had a poo and I'm not sure if me bum's properly clean?)

(Michelle: Are you joking me?)

(Charlie: No. It gets itchy if you don't wipe it properly Mam; you know that.)

(Michelle: You know if you weren't in isolation, and you were having this poo at school, rather than at home... would you be asking Mrs Jackson to come and check if you'd wiped all the poo off properly?)

(Charlie: Ughhh god Mam! No!)

(Michelle: Well pretend I'm Mrs Jackson Charlie... and sort your own frigging bum out!)

(Sound of door slamming and Michelle coming back into the room)

(Zoom 'unmute' sound?)

Hello everyone! Ee I'm so sorry. He was just stuck on some of his maths lesson. All sorted! Oh god I've lost where I am in me notes though. Two seconds. I knew this would happen...

(Paper shuffling sounds)

Ah ok. Ok I've found where I'm up to. The team. My lovely team.

It helped so much that I've got great supportive colleagues. The lasses at work. And the lads. There's only a couple of lads in our office, but that's fairly typical for this kind of work. You get more females drawn to it.

We definitely felt like we had to keep supporting each other, and when one of us broke down, someone else was there to pick them up. To say "You're doing a great job. You're doing all you possibly can do."

I started a scheme at work, unofficial mind, a bit of a rota to keep an eye on the kids during evenings and weekends. We incorporated it into that 'hours exercise rule'. Remember that? It's mad isn't it even now, a year on, looking back. The idea that we were only allowed out for an hour a day. And it had to be deemed exercise. Bizarre.

We definitely bent some rules there. You weren't supposed to exercise with people outside your household were you? But hey. Sue me. I've got no regrets about that. I'd rather have had a slap on the wrist from the police than the suicide of one of those kids on me conscience. Funny things go on inside your head when you're alone for too long. And those kids were alone far too much.

I felt a huge responsibility when speaking to the, the service users, to be optimistic. It was false optimism... but I like to think I did a good job of pretending I really believed things were going to be fine.

We, me and my colleagues, our main objective was to reassure them. Tell them it was for a finite amount of time and that we'd be there to help them through it. Until this 'new normal' they kept talking about on the news turned up and then everything would be OK.

It wasn't that we lied to them, gave them false promises or anything. We just tried to let them know they weren't alone and that we'd muddle through it together.

I stopped putting my makeup and my nice clothes on for the zooms after a couple of weeks. The kids were telling me they felt depressed and saying "what's the point in getting all ready when you're not even allowed to go anywhere?" And I had to agree with them! So I'd log onto the zooms, in me jarmies, with no makeup on. And we'd all kind of say "eee look at the state of us." And we'd have a laugh about it. We wanted them to know the staff were human and feeling crap too. We wanted them to know that their fears and anxieties were completely normal.

And I think we did do that, to a large extent. I just wish we'd had more staff to pick up the workload. We really did work ourselves into the ground over that first lockdown. Not because there was pressure from our managers or anything, just because we had to. You don't get into this job if you're not going to be all in for the people you're there to support. It's not a 9-5. And to be honest... that has caused a lot of issues in my own family. I've been accused by my own kids of caring about the kids at work more than I care about them. Plenty of times. Usually when they're trying to ask me how to do their fractions or spellings when I'm on a

call with a young person who's crying and desperate. I've definitely been guilty of ignoring my own kids, or being really narky with them.

Me husband works for an IT company and he just switches off at 5pm when he logs off. And he wants me to be able to do the same. I think he thinks I'm a martyr. That I should have clearer boundaries. I see his face when my work phone rings on a Sunday lunchtime or something. As it always does. It does take its toll on your relationship.

The problem is social services have been slashed to the bone over the past ten years since I did me training. So by the time the pandemic hit; we just didn't have the resources to deal with the amount of kids we had on our caseloads. And there's a huge shortage of qualified social workers in South Tyneside. So when you did have a concern, there was nobody to liaise with. And you can't just go "Well, their social worker isn't picking up the phone. I'll just tell that kid to hang on til next week.". You just get your clothes back on at 11 o'clock at night and you go check on the kid yourself.

And now it seems to me that Covid, this pandemic, has become a really convenient excuse to brush the huge gaps in services under the carpet.

Haven't got a social worker? Ah it's cos of Covid.

Had your support hours cut? It'll be down to Covid.

Can't get a job or an apprenticeship or even benefits? Covid.

And the people who impose these lockdowns, the government, the advisors whoever. I just don't think they've got any perception whatsoever of the consequences for these young people. The news every night was about care homes and schools and hospitals, and I'm not saying that's not all vitally important cos it is. But did you see one news report about care leavers?

It's a load of crap. And I know I probably shouldn't say all of that, but, well the point of this well-being event is to discuss what the pandemic has done to our wellbeing.

And my well-being well, it's not great if I'm honest. I'm knackered. From trying to be all things to all people. A good Mam, a half decent wife, friend, a daughter, a school teacher. All of that's hard enough, even before you throw work into the mix. And I'm just... angry. I'm angry lots of the time. Because the inequalities these kids already had to face are now stacked up so high, it's a wall I don't think they'll ever get over.

I don't know what the answer is. That's above my pay grade. And to be totally honest, I'm too tired to fight the system. I've had to accept I'll just do the best I can. For everybody.

Something that's really important now I think, is to have things in place for if this ever, god forbid, happened again. We have to have learned something from it, as a society. Otherwise all those people who've lost their lives either to Covid, or to suicide or because of delays in cancer treatment... well they've really just died in vain haven't they?

We have to prioritise safe and consistent ways to support people if face to face isn't an option.

Right.

I don't want to finish on a negative. I'm actually a really positive person usually!

I've seen some incredible acts of kindness over the past 18 months. Foster families offering to take kids back, unpaid, so they weren't alone for the lockdowns. Neighbours stopping me after I'd done a doorstep visit to a kid, saying they were aware of their circumstances and wanted to help. The kids themselves, checking in on each other and on us, the staff. Asking if we're doing ok! They're just amazing. And they deserve the absolute best we can possibly offer them.

My brilliant brilliant colleagues who've been tireless in their efforts to support the kids. They've shown them such love.

I hope when they're old and grey they'll tell their grandkids about this crazy, awful time and say "I did something really good. Really important. And I'm proud of meself for it."

Right... That's all I've got for you! I don't know if that's the type of speech I was supposed to make really. I hope it was ok. Thank you for letting me have my say. And thank you for listening.