

## NEWS



Inset, Marley Starskey Butler and, above, a photo of their birth mother

## Social work in the frame - new exhibition sheds light on sector

**The complexities of social work have been captured by an artist and social worker in a new multidisciplinary exhibition.**

Marley Starskey Butler's work depicts family, empathy, trauma, identity and understanding, reflected through mixed media.

Called *Thirty-Six*, the exhibition at Birmingham's MAC combines Marley's lived experience of social work in Leeds and Wolverhampton in the 80s and 90s with becoming a social worker later in life.

Marley says art has informed how they approach social work and vice versa: "Without that foundation, I wouldn't be as good a social worker. So much about art is about reflection, and that's also a huge thing in social work.

"In turn, social work informs my art because it is a big jigsaw puzzle of people working together to ensure the safety of a child. Art is similarly about the bigger picture."

Marley graduated from the University of Birmingham with a Master's in social work in 2015 and began working for Wolverhampton Council in child protection.

Art has always been central to Marley in processing life experiences and, they believe, also has the power to change perceptions of social work.

"Social work is a misunderstood sector," Marley said. "It's quite private, and needs to be, but there isn't much in popular culture showing social workers as humans, going about their lives.

"Art can shine a light."

Marley's experiences as a social worker feature

directly in the exhibition through a series of images taken from train windows on the way to and from assessments.

"I loved doing assessments that were far away, as it meant I had time to sit and think on trains. I would take pictures and then make connections between images and how I was feeling at the time.

"Assessments can be so complex and your thoughts can be quite messy, but then you have to make a decision. The photos represent that journey. It's hard. We are all just humans. It's not a science, we can't know the future."

Their experience of care and relationships with primary caregivers has also informed their artistic practice.

Marley worked with their birth mother in Leeds, where they spent their first three years, on a project which became part of the exhibition.

"My birth mother knows I am an artist. I'd just got my records from the local council and wanted to talk through them with her and photograph the process.

"One part of the exhibition is just text, based on the multiple conversations we had in the making of that artwork.

"When I think back, I was influenced by my social work practice in how I was able to talk to her. I have the communication skills in terms of how to open up conversation – that's how the work came about."

*Thirty-Six* runs until Sunday 28 January at MAC Birmingham and is reviewed in this edition of *PSW* on page 38

## Trowler and MacAlister in King honours

England's first chief social worker for children Isabelle Trowler and the chair of England's review of children's social care Josh MacAlister were among those recognised in the New Year's Honours List.

Trowler, who has been in the role since 2013 and is a founding member of the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (now Foundations), received a CBE.

MacAlister, current executive chair of Foundations and founder of the graduate fast-track Frontline training scheme for children's social work, received an OBE.

Others recognised included BASW member and adult safeguarding lead, Shabnam Ahmed Butt, who received an MBE in recognition of her work on anti-racist practice and supervision.

Children's practitioner Kirstie Baughan was recognised for work supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and refugees, both in social work practice and as a volunteer for Care4Calais.

## Autistic adults failed by LAs

More than 10,000 autistic adults in England are not receiving adequate social care from councils, who are breaking the law "daily".

Researchers from the Autism Alliance found more than three quarters (77 per cent) reach crisis point before care is given, leading to family breakdown and confinement in mental health hospitals. They blamed a lack of investment.