

BASW England Student & NQSW group position statement on the impact of COVID-19 on student studies, placements and work experiences

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work in the UK with offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. With over 20,000 members we exist to promote the best possible social work services for all people who may need them, while also securing the well-being of social workers working in all health and social care settings.

This position statement is based on feedback from members of our group for social work students and qualified and registered newly qualified social workers (NQSW's). Outlined below are the views from members of the group in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on their studies, placements and work experiences.

Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

PPE is acknowledged as being essential for all frontline workers within health and social care during the COVID-19 crisis. BASW have issued guidance on how PPE should be utilised for home visits here: <https://www.basw.co.uk/professional-practice-guidance-home-visits-during-covid-19-pandemic>. However, numerous students and NQSW's have expressed concern at their welfare not being prioritised in relation to appropriate training, safe use (including disposal) and access to the use of PPE whilst on their placements or in workplace settings. This has led to some students feeling devalued as social workers of the future. Students on placement and registered NQSW's in practice should not be treated any less favourably in being provided with PPE than their more experienced colleagues. The dedication, hard work and commitment of students and NQSW's combined with the fragility of their status as students or newly qualified practitioners should not be used to exploit them and place them in potentially harmful situations. It is also important the power dynamics within working environments are addressed where management have more ability to apply social distancing (e.g. remote working and prioritisation of home visits) than frontline practitioners. Unfortunately, we have also had many reports of 'disclaimers' being used to protect organisations who continue to place students in potentially harmful situations in which they feel duty-bound to comply with. For example, students have been asked to sign disclaimers about continuing their placements and undertaking 'risky' social work activities whilst on placement in order to satisfy course requirements. These issues need to be quickly resolved to minimise potentially dangerous outcomes and provide the necessary safeguards.

No detriment policies

No detriment policies are designed to act as fair process to ensure exceptional situations (which a pandemic is) do not adversely affect students' grades. Here is an example of a no detriment policy: <https://www.mynsu.co.uk/getsupport/covid-19/policy/>. Under these policies, students should obtain at least the average grade attained so far in their studies and training, or a better grade depending on results in exams or assignments - as long as they secure at least a pass mark. However, some education providers do not have a no detriment policy. Other students are being advised they do not meet the criteria for the 'no

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detriment policy', as they are on a professional course and a definitive decision is required from the regulator Social Work England to make this applicable to all social work students during this pandemic.

Social Work England has stated publicly it will "...support the move by a number of education providers to reassure students that their final or year-end marks will not be negatively affected by the alternative modes of assessments that are being introduced during the current crisis. [Also, Social Work England] will be working with [their] education and training advisory group to consider the need for further messaging and guidance in this, and other, areas as soon as possible." We believe this position does not go far enough, and we urge Social Work England to speedily impose a clear, equitable and universal statement that all HEIs should adopt a 'no detriment policy' for all social work students.

Practical issues, childcare, student finance, university accommodation.

Some students are in a position whereby they have been offered the chance to make up their placement days over the summer holidays or during half-term holiday. However, this poses many issues for students who are parents; adult carers; have limited support networks; are experiencing financial difficulties; have unsecure accommodation and/or have other important commitments to manage. Education and placement providers should consider these matters fairly on a case-by-case basis and work cooperatively with students to identify mutually workable solutions and avoid dictating approaches which may place unnecessary pressures on students.

Low-income students and their families

We are aware that some students will be offered the chance to volunteer or work as social work assistants and be remunerated. However, this will mean low-income students and their families will have their benefits (Universal credit and tax credits) reassessed for the extra income - potentially leaving them in the awkward predicament of halting their studies to navigate the bureaucracy of the benefit system for a temporary wage. Further consideration and guidance is needed to outline how these temporary social work assistant roles will function, the implications for students' studies and the incentives available for students to accept these opportunities.

Insurance

Education and placement providers have liability insurance for students on placement. However, employers need to clarify the legal insurance and liability protection of social work students who transition to become 'volunteers' or paid workers during this pandemic.

Time delays

Some student social workers have expressed their disappointment with the responsiveness from Social Work England in relation to their advice and guidance for students and education providers in relation to placements. We have been contacted by students who are of the view that Social Work England should have responded in a more responsive way and actively engaged with students during this time. Our membership group of students and registered NQSWs want the regulator to work closer with BASW to raise the profile of social work. This enable the profession to be viewed by the public with the same esteem as other frontline workers such as health and social care workers.

Qualified & registered NQSW's

NQSW's completing their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) are in a precarious position in the current circumstances. There is a risk that some NQSWs may not be supported to complete the ASYE due to the wide-ranging pressures placed on their organisations (through no fault of their own) and may struggle if they continue to practice

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but are not fully assessed until later in the year or beyond. Clearer guidance from Social Work England and Skills for Care is needed on how NQSW's can be properly and realistically advised and supported during this time of national crisis.

Also, the Government guidance is that key workers should go into work if they are unable to work from home. However, we have had reports that some registered NQSW's (and students on placement) have the capability to work from home, but are being told by their employers (and placement providers) they cannot work from home without good reason – which seems contrary to the Government advice.

Employers & placement providers

Employers of NQSW's and placement providers for students should take into account that there may be gaps in the knowledge of both practitioners and students due to the organisational responses to COVID-19. Government and Public Health guidance interrupted placements and impacted on practice in the workplace. It will be important to ensure adequate advice/support is provided to promote professional development, rather than imposing any punitive or capabilities measures.

Placement days

More clarity and guidance is needed from Social Work England regarding the possibility of reducing placement days. We are aware education providers can consider a reduction of the number of days for students who have completed a significant proportion of the placement and met all the learning outcomes to the required standard. However, many students have expressed a wish for a minimum number of placement days to be set by Social Work England to assist the discussions with their education and placement providers.

Due to the pandemic, there is a possibility that students may graduate without completing robust placements. However, we acknowledge that Practice Educator and Education providers play an integral role in the assessment of students. The impact of these unprecedented times could result in some employer organisations deferring ASYE programmes or result in newly qualified staff feeling vulnerable or unsupported due to no fault of their own. The ramifications on their career if they were to be passed without a robust placement may result in them leaving the profession prematurely or being deregistered later on. There is a delicate balance that needs to be achieved in streamlining existing processes.

Placement endings

As a relationship-based profession, it is important the work of social work students on placement is valued, including those whose placements have been paused or ended abruptly. It is essential to consider the ethical implications of abruptly stopping contact with service-users and the potentially detrimental impact on their well-being and circumstances. Where possible, BASW strongly advocates that proper 'endings' are facilitated between people with lived experience service-users and social work students.

Emma Grady (Chair of the Student & NQSW group)

For further information please contact:

Co-ordinator of members' responses and compilation
Wayne Reid
BASW England Professional Officer
British Association of Social Workers
wayne.reid@basw.co.uk

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37 Wellesley House | Waterloo Court | Waterloo Street | Birmingham | B2 5PP