

Robin Swann MLA
Minister for Health
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
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08/04/2020

Dear Minister

It is beyond doubt that we are living in unprecedented times. The impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on our Health and Social Care service is severe and worsening daily. BASW wishes to acknowledge the tremendous efforts of everyone in the system to support each other in the most difficult of circumstances and we commend your leadership during these most trying of circumstances.

As the number of confirmed coronavirus cases grows, social workers in Northern Ireland continue to support the most vulnerable and in need members of our society. The risks facing front-line social workers undertaking this work are acute and it is essential that all necessary steps are taken to protect them both from becoming infected with COVID-19 and from spreading the infection to their families, colleagues and service users.

BASW's UK-wide engagement with members has highlighted a lack of Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) to be a major concern. Our ongoing contact with members in Northern Ireland indicates social workers are deeply anxious concerning the risks to themselves and their families posed by a lack of PPE.

Given these concerns, BASW NI welcomes the recent shipment of PPE received by Health and Social Care and are relieved to hear from some frontline staff that PPE is now being provided, it is vital that all social workers receive adequate supplies and guidance for its use.

The Public Health England (PHE) guidance on PPE for health and social care published on 03/04/2020 (updated 06/04/2020)—in particular the guidance for primary care, outpatient and community care settings—has some transferable relevance to social workers' contexts. However, the PHE guidance and the Chief Medical Officer's circular on PPE guidance, issued

on 3 April, are overwhelmingly focused on clinicians. Neither is specific to social workers nor take account of many of the 'community care' settings in which social workers practice.

Social work often entails challenges in establishing communications and rapport between professionals and the people they seek to help. It often entails the use of statutory powers, making managing risks within professional encounters (particularly in community settings) distinctively challenging. Social workers will continue to intervene where there is suspected abuse of a child or older person or assessing someone with an acute mental illness who may present significant harm to themselves or others, this will almost always be in that person's home. These are the unique circumstances of social work practice that we do not believe are covered by the current PHE guidance.

The PHE guidance detailing use of PPE in [home visit contexts](#) provides advice in cases where 'any member of the household is a possible or confirmed case'. The guidance assumes that social workers can straightforwardly establish with people being visited that they, or someone on their behalf, can and will reliably communicate whether or not they are symptomatic or have a diagnosis. We believe this is unrealistic for some social work activities and this should be recognised explicitly in the PHE guidance.

Furthermore, the PHE guidance does not advise 'in case' use of PPE to deal with asymptomatic risk. Given emerging evidence of viral shedding in the absence of symptoms (and given the reported vagueness of symptoms in 'mild' cases, for instance) we believe this is an inadequate interpretation for inclusion in national guidance designed to protect public professionals in the workplace and to protect (and importantly, to reassure) the public.

Since before the current lock-down arrangements, BASW NI has worked to ensure key social work leaders in the Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Board and the Health and Social Care Trusts were doing all that is needed to provide suitable practice guidance for staff to inform the continued delivery of their statutory functions and we acknowledge the tremendous effort of all involved. Working to support the profession, BASW has produced two guidance documents, one on [Home Visiting](#) and the other is [Ethics Guidance](#).

Following the Association's most recent engagement with the Office of Social Services I was pleased to receive assurances that guidance for foster carers, residential social workers, those working in homelessness support services, Independent providers and carers has already been published, and guidance on home visiting for social workers will be produced soon. We welcome the work of OSS, the HSCB and Executive Directors of Social Work to step down all but essential home visiting for social workers and to identify how social workers can be permitted and supported to practice using digital technology throughout the pandemic. This will undoubtedly protect professionals and service users alike.

It is essential that social workers are included in the list of priority groups for coronavirus testing. We are hearing directly from social workers that whole teams are depleted because colleagues need to self-isolate and pressures will increase as the pandemic worsens. Vulnerable service users also need assurance that their social workers can visit them in their home without the risk of infection.

The issues we face in NI are not unique and our live [survey conducted across the UK](#) has had in excess of 1,600 responses. The most common issues identified are shared across the various nations and concern a lack of PPE, the need for social work specific guidance, testing of frontline staff and fears regarding personal safety. In all of our contact with social workers we have been overwhelmed by their commitment, dedication and compassion for those who use their services and their desire to continue to support and protect people throughout this pandemic is unshakable.

As the professional body for social work across the UK our colleagues in England have written to the Prime Minister and the Director General for Global and Public Health. In Wales colleagues wrote to the First Minister and in Scotland an open letter was sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport and the Minister for Children and Young People.

I reaffirm BASW NI's commitment to working with you and your officials, to ensure the interests of our members, and those who use social work services are met in this time of crisis.

Yours sincerely



ORLAITH MCGIBBON
Chair, BASW Northern Ireland