



The professional association for
social work and social workers

The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services

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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 nearly 21,000 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.

In responding to the consultation, we have consulted with the BASW England Children and Families Group and with BASW England members across all regions. Our member base is rich and diverse in terms of social care expertise, those who have completed the form include frontline social workers, team managers, and allied practitioners across child protection, adult social care and other specialist teams, as well as academics in the field, practitioners in the voluntary sector and other organisations. In addition, throughout this consultation, reference will be made to a BASW survey, 'Social Work during Coronavirus' (COVID 19) which has been conducted with over 2,400 respondents. The aim of the survey was to capture the experiences of social workers throughout the UK during the pandemic in terms of resources available, guidance given, workload, wellbeing amongst other key issues.

The implementation of the critical workers policy

Key observations raised by members include the following:

- Social workers are struggling to manage a combination of work and home responsibilities. 84% of those who completed our survey said that they are working 'much more than usual' in the context of homeworking.
- A further area of concern is the limited hours being provided by schools (9-3pm), which places key-working parents in extremely challenging situations regarding childcare arrangements.
- Members have reported that in some cases, several schools have merged resources to support children. This is due to a combination of unsafe ratios, a high level of students with complex needs, or a high volume of staff who have underlying health conditions.
- There are concerns that some schools are discouraging children to attend school. One member said:

'My local school has struggled to provide places for all children and has actively encouraged parents to keep their children at home. This is because it is safer and because they face their own issues with staffing and trying to provide what service they can with limited staff numbers.'

How consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country

In the early stages of the pandemic, members advised that there was a lack of consensus across England (and even within local authorities) as to what constituted 'critical' and 'essential' social work. In several local authorities, critical work has been prioritised as statutory emergency visits including safeguarding, and supporting children and families with complex needs.

One member reported that critical work constitutes 'either as incoming duty requests or child protection visits where the risk is high'. However, others report marked differences. For example, another member said their local authority aimed to 'provide a 7-day active emergency service' which included staff being part of the EDT service during weekends.

Issues raised by members in relation to the practical application of critical work are as follows:

- **Guidance** – Concerns were raised around a lack of guidance as to how to assess whether work was 'critical' enough to warrant an in-person home visit. Emergency duty team social workers reported a lack of national bespoke guidance for non-EDT workers responding to issues in an out of hours context.
- **Legal proceedings** – One member reported that public law applications were on hold indefinitely. Others reported that delays were common, meaning that children experiencing significant harm may remain in unsafe households for longer than would normally be acceptable.
- **Quality of critical work** – Concerns were raised regarding the quality of critical work, when carried out, due to social distancing.

'Services have been significantly affected - all children have been rag rated with those assessed as priority being seen in person, however, social work is relational, phone calls and video calls are not as effective.'

- **Children with SEND**. The critical work undertaken for disabled children is inconsistent, and ranges from 'tele-coaching, worksheets and virtual meetings' to in-school attendance. Where virtual means are used, social workers raise concerns that some children with learning disabilities are unable to use technology, and therefore access learning.

'Children with challenging behaviour and Learning Disability cannot follow safe guidelines and their parents / siblings (often single parent families) were left to cope alone.'

'Services are more likely to be offered to those with more vocal parents, meaning the provision of services is not necessarily based on need but on visibility'.

Members recommended that further government guidance becomes available regarding practice with disabled children, tailoring risk assessments in relation to disabilities, and suggested that a shielding carers package should be offered.

The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

Members have consistently reported a significant strain of the capacity of children's services – 64% said that their capacity to safeguard effectively, compared to before the pandemic, was much or somewhat worse. Only 32% said it had remained the same. Just 3% said it was somewhat improved, and only 1% said much improved.

Furthermore, only 5% of BASW survey respondents said they were experiencing ethical or moral dilemmas less or much less than before. This highlights the hazardous and uncertain context within which social workers are now practising.

This decrease in the capacity to support vulnerable children and young people occurred despite the context of low referrals nationally during the early stages of the pandemic. In late April, the children's commissioner said that in some areas, referrals had dropped by half. One social care department in the South East of England reported that they were dealing with only 25 per cent of their normal daily referral levels (Weale, 2020). Concerns have been raised; however, around how local authorities will respond to the estimated three-fold surge in recoveries (Davis, 2020).

The capacity of children's services to deliver interventions is being stretched due to the following:

1. **Domestic violence:** New referrals involving domestic abuse are particularly notable, which mirrors sharp escalations in referrals to charitable organisations, such as [Refuge](#), who reported a 25% increase in calls and online requests since March 2020 – their [helpline website](#) showing a 150% increase.
2. **Increased reports of allegations of threats of forced marriage** – The Freedom Charity reported a 45% increase in calls since the beginning of lockdown.
3. **Concerns around an increase of FGM** – Even outside of the context of the pandemic, FGM is known to occur more frequently during the holidays when school are less able to monitor signs of this.
4. **Increased instability of foster placements due to lockdown pressures** – Several members reported the foster carers are isolated, and placements increasingly fragile.

5. **Emergency placements** – Several BASW members completing our online survey reported a lack of emergency placements in cases whereby carers in the ‘high-risk’ category can no longer provide care.
6. **Increase in families relying on social care intervention** – One member said:

Work with children and families ‘can no longer be closed as they are relying on the support from social workers due to COVID-19’.

- **Assessment and intervention.** The capacity of children’s services to undertake assessments, and subsequent interventions, has been limited. Owing to the lockdown restrictions, social workers have reported that they have had no option but to conduct sensitive appointments with children in car parks, gardens, and on doorsteps to cite but a few examples. Whilst social workers have responded to restrictions with creativity and flexibility, there are concerns around a lack of confidentiality in such circumstances.
- **Technology.** Technology has been used to increase the capacity of children’s services to respond to support vulnerable children and families, which has yielded mixed results. 73% of social workers responding to the BASW survey said they are using digital/remote communication to connect more effectively with families than before, however this still highlights that over a quarter of the staff force require training or investment in this area. The following concerns have been raised in relation to the use of technology in children’s services during the pandemic, though it is worth noting that these issues were more prevalent at the beginning of lockdown:
 1. Limited guidance on best practice when using technology to engage with vulnerable children and families.
 2. Limited technology available to both social workers and socio-economically disadvantaged families. This issue is exacerbated in rural regions, where there is limited access to high speed broadband.
 3. Security and ethical concerns in relation to certain digital platforms.
 4. Social workers have reported having to utilise multiple platforms when connecting with different agencies, organisations, and families. When technological issues arise, this can cause a lapse in communication, and vital information is not shared in a time-sensitive manner. From safeguarding meetings, multi-agency communication has been shown to be imperative in terms of protecting children from harm.

5. Concerns are also being raised in relation to the capacity to effectively monitor children via digital means.

'It is impossible to have a 360-degree view of [the home] environment and observe interactions between members of the family'. This may give rise to scenarios whereby children who ordinarily must be given the opportunity to be spoken to alone are not able to share their wishes and feelings or make disclosures.'

- **Database failures.** The capacity for social workers to reach the needs of vulnerable children and families has been hampered by system failures, whereby they have unable to access data, record visits, or complete assessments in accordance with expected deadlines. Members said the following:

'IT is a nightmare; systems are slow and not accessible due to the number of staff working remotely. This has meant that I have had to go against organisational guidance and attend in person to the office'.

'Electronic systems that have now been in place for years are now central to being able to work at all with access to historic recording'

'We are trying to work from home with an IT system not fit for the job'

- **Increasing workload.** Capacity to meet need has been diminished by increasing workload. Given that social workers are self-isolating or in the vulnerable or shielding category and cannot carry out in-person visits, this means that other social workers have no option but to absorb additional work. For those who are in the vulnerable/shielded category, there have been reports of inconsistent messaging.

'There is conflict and indecisiveness [within management]. I fall within in the vulnerable staff group and was told to work from home. Now [my local authority] are telling this group to come into the office once a week and visit families despite the research showing that people with Covid-19 are presenting without symptoms.'

- **Limited voluntary or non-statutory services.** Social workers are less able to signpost service users to services than previously. Under the lockdown conditions many of the support services are either closed or not operating at full capacity.

‘There are no services to refer to for support and families are very isolated without their support networks. It creates a pressure cooker situation for some families where abuse becomes increasingly likely. At the same time many of these families are not sending their children to school so understanding the actual situation for these children is very difficult’.

There have been some positive examples of local authorities adapting to increase capacity to support vulnerable children and families. Such examples include:

- Cases being triaged early on to ensure that those who were particularly vulnerable were identified and prioritised.
- Local authorities teaming up with partnering agencies (such as the local food bank and transport) to ensure basic needs are met.
- The establishment of duty rotas, whereby social workers interchange between isolating and community work.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector

The early years sector is a safety net for at-risk children, given that staff provide a wealth of information for social workers, often reporting disclosures or making critical safeguarding observations; in the absence of monitoring from nursery staff, health visitors, social workers have reported that it has been more difficult to identify issues around child development and safeguarding.

Prior to the pandemic, low-income families benefitted from 20 hours of free childcare, providing their children with the opportunity to learn and develop. In addition, some parents / carers could attend baby/toddler groups in the community for both support and guidance. In both these scenarios, it is unequivocal that closures have had a detrimental impact within the early years sector. This is most concerning, given that children in the early years category are highly vulnerable; Almost half (45%) of all Serious Case Reviews in England involve a child under 1, and children of this age face around eight times the average risk of child homicide (Cuthbert et al., 2011). Furthermore, the highest rates of fatal child abuse are found among children aged 0-4 years (WHO, 2002). BASW welcomes government support and investment in this area to protect children at such a critical point in their development.

The early years funded entitlement and the childcare market

Members raised significant concerns in relation to the impact of the coronavirus of the early years funded entitlement and the childcare market.

‘There is a possibility that vulnerable families will be less likely to access free nursery hours if there are closures in this sector. The childcare market may also suffer if businesses have been forced to close, or if staff have had to find new employment given the uncertain market’

‘There is a shortage of places and good and affordable childcare without COVID-19, but the current situation has exacerbated these problems’.

Support for pupils and families during closures

- **Concerns have been raised about the fact that many families are not sending their children to school, even if eligible to do so.** Only 5% of vulnerable pupils were attending school as of 22nd April (Weale and Adams, 2020). Furthermore, the children’s commissioner reported that 700,000 children do not have a laptop or tablet for home learning – putting them at risk of falling behind their peers (Merrick, June 2020). The absence of a multi-agency safety net for children raises concerns around missed opportunities of for identifying safeguarding concerns.

‘There has been no direction on what to do with families on child protection plans who state they are self-isolating due to Covid-19 symptoms. NHS Guidance is starting to wait 7 days before contacting 111. Therefore, for families where we worry about significant harm to children cannot evidence they have sought medical advice. There is no clear policy on what we do for child protection visits with government policy currently aimed at health professionals or adult social care’.

Naturally, this leads to concerns that at-risk children are being exposed to domestic violence, neglect, and physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Members have also raised fears that basic needs are not being met; during the first few months of lockdown, 7.7m adults reduced or missed meals and 3.7 used food banks (Butler, 2020).

The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning

Members report that there have been significant inconsistencies in this area, with some students having been actively supported to access interactive lessons, whereas others have had limited support such as 'homework packs'.

BASW England is particularly concerned about emerging research in relation to disadvantaged groups accessing remote learning. Research from the Sutton Trust showed that at the start of April 2020, 34% of pupils had taken part in live or recorded online lessons, and that pupils from middle class homes were much more likely to have taken part (30% doing so at least once a day compared to 16% of working class pupils). At private schools, 51% of primary and 57% of secondary students had accessed online lessons every day, more than twice as likely as their counterparts in state schools.

Even where a high level of interactive or online learning is provided, students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups do not always have access to technology or internet to access it.

Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

Members have consistently raised concerns about children and young people's mental health and safety outside of the oversight on in-person education. Concerns have been raised with regards to the impact of the pandemic upon children's mental health and resilience to a rapidly changing world.

In the most severe cases involving children being admitted to hospital as a result of mental health, community services have not always been available to provide crucial support following discharge.

'Children have been discharged from mental health wards into the community with no support from CAMHS in place. As such this has triggered social workers to become involved to offer support. However, situations such as this should be supported through CAMHS and leaving such young people without this support is largely due to funding and capacity issues'.

The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

Members report a surge in food parcel requests, family reliance on benefits or significant loss of income. According to research by Reaching Families (April 2020), 48% of families with one or more SEND children have lost income since the beginning of the lockdown.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

Approach to Free School Meals

Whilst efforts to provide ongoing free school meals have been welcomed, the execution has not been wholly successful. One member said:

'It is also concerning that online 'free school meal' vouchers have not worked for many families, or are inaccessible to those who are not digitally literate or do not own an electronic device'. said: 'The free school meal voucher system has presented delays and a lack of clarity. There have been multiple systems and poor communication'.

Several members reported that families who are not digitally literate or who do not have access to technology due to low incomes have missed out on this vital provision.

Pupils with SEND

BASW members overwhelmingly report that school closures have had a significantly negative impact on children with special educational needs and disabilities. One member said:

"Some schools are denying children attending even though they're classed as vulnerable. Schools are not engaging in meetings. Schools are discriminating against families and ignoring CSC information and advice."

However, examples of good practice have been identified as follows:

1. Working closely with allied professionals' schools, health visitors, housing police CAMHS'.
2. Use of existing communication methods to share and update information and support guidance to all families with disabled children.

Furthermore, according to Reaching Families, overall school closures have had a significantly detrimental impact on such children; key findings include:

- Only 34% of families say they are receiving support from their child's school
- 57% of children having significant problems in change of routine

- 47% of children have significant anxiety since the lockdown
- 51% of parents say they are having significant problems managing their child's behaviour

Considering the above, 90% of parents think the government should classify SEND families as a vulnerable group – a recommendation strongly supported by BASW. England

Children in Need

In terms of the long-term impact on most vulnerable groups, there are concerns that the attainment gap compared to more affluent groups will increase. The Education Endowment Foundation estimates the following:

'The projections suggest that school closures will widen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, likely reversing progress made to narrow the gap since 2011. Plausible "good" and "bad" estimates range from the gap widening from 11% to 75%'.

BASW England is concerned that children in need may be at higher risk of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) due to an increased likelihood of being exposed to domestic violence, abuse and poor parental mental health as a result of the pressures associated with lockdown.

This is particularly worrying, given that ACEs are known to impact survivors across their life span. According to research published in Child Adolescent Psychiatry Mental Health (2019), 'Long-term effects include increased risk for numerous mental and physical disorders, reduced life quality, developmental and cognitive impairments, social problems, and a reduction of up to 20 years in life expectancy'.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

- Tailored contingency plans to be provided for every child and family accessing social care and education settings during and post pandemic and a national preparedness emergency plan response.
- Ensuring equal access to digital learning platforms/training available to all children and families to access these resources as well as creating a national digital strategy.
- Ensuring that vulnerable groups are prioritised in terms of access to food during national emergencies at a local and regional level.
- Providing families with an emergency fund that they can access speedily, and abolishing universal credit, which cause delays and leave children vulnerable.

- Devising a plan for low-income families in need of emergency food and housing provision.
- Creating hubs of schools that can support each other and take children from different areas if they have capacity or if one school becomes unable to provide enough places.
- Developing more flexible and affordable childcare, particularly for children of keyworkers. Extending paternity and maternity leave.
- Increasing resources specifically for the 0-4 age range to prevent significant disruption during this critical development period.
- The government to work with BASW England to implement our guidance and recommendations nationally in relation to the role of social workers in disasters, which is a major workstream currently within the organisation.
- There should be consistent investment in civil contingencies and a national strategy, with reference to the specific role which children and family social workers must have in a time of major incidents and disasters.
- Tailored plans for direct work with families should be developed, with an emphasis on relationship-based social work during a pandemic. BASW England has been leading on the promotion of relationship-based children and families social work, and can be contacted for further information.
- A robust plan should be created around how best to prepare for next stage of recovery post COVID-19, with specific focus on how to support those with SEND. There are concerns that these groups may struggle to adapt and transition post-lockdown.
- Establishing a plan view to minimising both the risk of infection and excessive working hours for frontline social workers. BASW England and the Social Workers Union can provide further details on best practice examples.

Staff force health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of social workers has been threatened as a direct result of the coronavirus. Within the BASW survey, when asked what their worries were, 97% responders shared concerns, only 3% did not have any worries. Furthermore, 50% of survey responders said that Compared to before the Covid-19 crisis, they feel less or much less supported by and connected to colleagues. Only 54% said they agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well supported or advised by their manager or supervisor during the pandemic.

40% of respondents to the BASW survey said they have encountered discrimination, equalities or rights breaches linked to Covid-19. 37% said this applied to themselves, 38% to individual or groups of service users, and 25% involving other staff.

Key comments from members pertaining to health and wellbeing include the following:

'Support is not consistent. As a disabled person my disability has not been considered within this way of working!'

'The right to say no seems to have been removed'

'My long-term health condition has worsened as I cannot get health care I need'

'Black workers in my team have more allocations.'

'I'm Black African and the news is saying my race is 4 x more likely to die from this virus and it is scary, but it feels like my concerns are not being taken seriously'

Sadly, a significant number of social workers and social care workers have lost their lives as a direct result of practicing in the context of the pandemic. [According to the ONS](#), men and women working in social care, a group including care workers and home carers, both had significantly raised rates of death involving COVID-19, with rates of 50.1 deaths per 100,000 men (97 deaths) and 19.1 deaths per 100,000 women (171 deaths).

Our recommendations to redress staff force health wellbeing are as follows:

1. A National Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Taskforce should be created, focusing on equality standards, overview and scrutiny of anti-racism, discrimination, and anti-oppressive practice at a national and regional level. Workstreams should include:
2. Social Work Recruitment and retention
3. Black and Ethnic Minority Leadership Programmes
4. Social Work Education
5. Data analysis, with a view to promoting the diversity of staff composition and communities served, referral data
6. Public Law Outline, with a view to keeping accurate records around the diversity data of families in this process
7. Regional Resources
8. Practice and workforce development

9. Protection for Whistle-blowers
10. Local Authority Health and wellbeing recovery plans

Further notable areas of concern

1. **Social Workers have been critical and vital members of the integrated workforce responding to COVID-19.** BASW England has for some time been campaigning on the essential role social workers must play in responding to disasters and major incidents, and guidance has been prepared by our association.
2. **The lack of Personal Protective Equipment for frontline services has been of serious concern.** As of the date of writing this report (28.05.2020), when social workers were asked if they now had the Personal Protective Equipment and risk management advice needed to undertake social work tasks outside the home, 37% of respondents said they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Members said:

'PPE took 5 weeks to finally arrive!'

'We were only told to use if either or both show symptoms of Covid-19, this makes me feel quite vulnerable as people could be asymptomatic.'

'Visits are limited to crisis visits and two sets of PPE are provided for each social worker in my team, more is provided if needed.'

'We had a video of what to wear and how, but we have 16 masks for the whole team'

'None received'

'Apparently PPE is available but only to be used if a family has symptoms or if we need to use it to convince a family to let us in.'

'You must travel to the office to collect PPE which could place us at risk.'

3. **No standardised approach for testing social work staff who are asymptomatic and symptomatic.** The high volume of daily contact in a range of settings (homes, schools, hospitals, prisons are more) expose social workers to a greater risk of being infected.

4. **The legislative framework of safeguarding children.** BASW is deeply concerned about the impact of the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which remove or dilute over 60 safeguards – without evidence of any connection to COVID-19. The amendments, rather than adding new protections for the most vulnerable children in society, serve to diminish and undermine hard-won protections for children which have been built up over decades. BASW has previously raised concerns around the absence of a clear, documented and facilitated process for the rationale, structured introduction and delivering of the regulations for local authorities.

Furthermore, prior to the pandemic, social work as a profession was operating in a context of austerity – meaning that the whole sector was not appropriately financially resourced to respond to a national emergency.

Despite continued cuts to funding, locally available services (such as the ‘sure start’ initiative) and a punitive benefits system which forced families into poverty, social workers were expected to meet increasing demands. [According to the IFS](#), total spending on children’s services fell in real terms by about 11% between 2009–10 and 2017–18. Furthermore, spending on early and preventative interventions, such as Sure Start and young people’s services, has been cut by around 60% in real terms between 2009–10 and 2016–17. The absence of preventative and early intervention services means that children and families who do present to social care do so in a state of advanced crisis.

Continued consultation with front-line social workers

Social workers across England and across the UK have demonstrated remarkable resilience, made enormous personal sacrifices, and have practiced in creative ways to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable are met during the pandemic. BASW proposes that further efforts are made to consult directly with front-line social workers, who have a wealth of expertise around continued best practice.

Membership response collated by

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