Professional practice guidance for Children and Families Social Work during Covid-19 Pandemic

Purpose and background

This guidance has been developed by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in consultation with practitioners, managers, academics and sector leaders to help social workers and their employers manage children and families social work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Social workers have told us they need consistent guidance to support professional practice with children and families. This is generic guidance for all social workers across the UK.

The guidance aims to:

- Help social workers think through the specific considerations around practice with children and families
- Help social workers consider the specific support they may need
- Provide information about additional resources and support for children and families and their social workers.

Note: This guidance is on-line and will be reviewed and updated. Please use the online version to ensure you have the most recent version. It will be reviewed at least monthly during the Covid-19 emergency.

Other useful documents

All practice, ethics and policy advice is available on the BASW website coronavirus pages https://www.basw.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-basw-updates

The guidance is grounded in BASW's ethical guidance for the pandemic as set out in our Covid-19 pandemic ethical guidance https://www.basw.co.uk/covid-19-pandemic%E2%80%93-ethical-guidance-social-workers

Health and Safety Advice from our partner trade union is here: Social Workers Union health and safety advice during Covid-19 https://www.basw.co.uk/swu-health-and-safety-duringcovid-19-position-statement

This advice is to be read in conjunction with BASW Home Visiting Guidance https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/BASW%20Practice%20guidance%20for%20home%20visits%20Final%20V1%2003%2004%202020_.pdf

Other guidance from Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, Public Health and other government departments, Principal Social Workers networks and others is also published on the BASW coronavirus updates web pages.

Using the guidance

This is professional guidance based on best available evidence, latest public health guidance, practice experience and expertise.

Social workers and social care staff will continue to have direct and indirect contact with children, adults at risk and families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope this guidance will support frontline practitioners and provide a framework to influence good practice within the workplace, as well as helping social workers to manage the ethical and emotional impact of their work

In the context of COVID-19 and learning from experiences in other countries self-isolation can also create an escalation of safeguarding, wellbeing concerns and all forms of abuse including domestic violence.

The priority must be to safeguard children, families and the workforce at all times.

Please use the guidance to:

- Guide and inform your practice
- Request appropriate support and guidance from your employer
- Raise professional concerns and questions about local practice or guidance with your employer, health and safety representative, trade union and BASW

This guidance does not:

- Replace public health national (official) guidance
- Replace regulatory or employer guidance
- Advise on how to manage statutory duties – this is for statutory bodies to advise based on the law, however BASW is developing ethical guidance.

Understanding of health and safety throughout this pandemic is developing. Practitioners should continue to check and must follow public health guidance at https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus. This includes the latest information about self-isolating, shielding and what to do if you have symptoms.

Practitioners should also be aware of the latest information from their government, regulator and their employer.

Personal, Protective Equipment (PPE)

There is no specific Public Health guidance for the use of PPE by social workers. However, there is guidance of relevance to social worker home visits particularly in the table of recommended PPE for primary, outpatient and community care settings (published 02 04 2020), available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/877599/T2_Recommended_PPE_for_primary_outpatient_and_community_care_by_setting_poster.pdf

Social workers undertaking home visits are advised to review this table to match to their situation.

It is likely that the section written for the setting of the Public Health guide *'Individuals' own home (current place of residence*) – and footnotes 3 and 7 - will be particularly relevant (excluding '*Home birth…*).

In all circumstances, social workers should ensure they maintain social distancing (more than 2m away from any other person) throughout the visit and as a minimum follow the latest Public Health (PHE) guidance re recommended PPE for individual home settings.

Latest (03 04 2020) Department for Education guidance for children's social care and social workers states '*PPE is not required unless the people being visited are symptomatic of coronavirus (COVID-19) or have a confirmed diagnosis of coronavirus (COVID-19).'*

BASW's advice is that asymptomatic risk – whether from the social worker to person/s being visited or vice versa – during the pandemic is significant. Social distancing of at least 2m should be upheld and relevant and effective PPE (e.g. face masks; gloves, sanitiser) should be built into the infection prevention risk plan for all social work visits where maintaining social distance cannot be assured.

Overall updates on guidance for health and care workers in a variety of roles are available from Public Health here https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england

The lack/insufficiency of PPE and training in its use for social workers is being raised with government and PHE by BASW

1. Practice with children and families

The importance of *strengths-based practice and compassionate social work* that builds upon and utilises the *power of relationships* has never been so important.

Top 10 Checklist

Here is a helpful *Top 10* checklist intended to *slow and order our thinking* when considering vulnerable children and their families (based on best practice and recent feedback from BASW members):

- Take *time* to reflect on your purpose - Are you monitoring based on previous risk analysis or are you making sure you are trying to assess and understand changed circumstances? Using local guidance and your own risk analysis experience and tools, identify the top 5 children on your caseload who are at most at risk (who are the children "who might keep you up at night"). You could apply a simple scaling tool from 0-10 (most at risk-no risk)
- What is the current safety plan and how does this fit with the children and family's needs in the current circumstances? – How fit for purpose is the plan in context of COVID-19? Consider how Covid-19 may add additional stress and risk to the situation.

Signs of Safety, as one approach, helps us to order our thinking through the use of three questions:

1. What's working well?
2. What are we worried about?
3. What needs to happen?

- For very complex family situations, consider using these types of questions in discussions where you can test your thinking or hypotheses with your peers. Our mantra through the current crisis is that we are "stronger together", so use your support network.

- The questions above can also be used to evaluate the service being provided to the family using Group supervision alongside 1.1 supervision.
- Importantly, use 1:1 supervision to get advice and support on a proposed course of action that is protective of children and families but also of yourself.
- Stay connected with the family, other professionals and community-based organisations throughout the above work and use this network to consider and co-produce safety planning for the child (doing with rather than too).

- Use the family and community resources and strengths to generate ideas but be clear about "bottom lines" e.g. contact with individuals who are a direct risk to the child. Members have been using closed WhatsApp groups to keep connected and encouraging families to keep safety journals (what's working well and worries).
- Agree a safe schedule for connections between yourself, family and partners and use of video or telephone technology (see below for further ideas).
- Consider how and when progress will be reviewed and virtual Core Group or other meetings (ask are the child safety goals being met?).
- The above process of **Assess, Plan and Review** is a circular way of working where we have to test and learn from our practice including what children and families are telling us, this is particularly critical as we are in uncharted waters.

The following are suggested to aid your work in this crisis:

- Signpost to Public Health materials and ensure children, young people and families understand the government guidance, and explore with them what might be the obstacles to following it. These may include:
  o Space constraints in the home
  o The lack of places to exercise
  o Financial pressures

If so, who is most at risk and how might you mitigate the issues arising?

- Establish whether anyone in the network is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and what the safety and welfare issues are.
- Provide clear, accessible materials advising young people and families how they get in contact with children's social care and their allocated worker, information changes to the delivery of services and how young people and families can contact duty.

- Provide clear, accessible sign posting information about key services for example domestic abuse helplines/refuge contacts, food banks, contacts for queries about benefit payments, recently unemployed
- Domestic abuse has been identified as a particular area of concern currently. Please see below for resources to support your work in this area.
- Where there are substance misuse issues, particular vulnerabilities may arise which need careful discussion in individual and group supervision.
- Pre-existing mental health difficulties may be exacerbated by the current situation. Think about what professionals are involved and mobilise their help and expertise.
- Consider consistent scripts (that may need updating daily) for contact staff.
- Check preferred time, contact details, contact method and venue for connecting with children, young people and families.
- Check about access to credit top-up if they are using a pay-as-you-go phone. Identify additional resources to support those who need to have a reliable and safe way of contacting services.
- Consider skype, video and other forms of digital capabilities, and make sure these are secure.
- If using technology to connect:
  - Check if anyone else is in the room or online
  - Check if the person is on speaker phone
  - Check if the call is being recorded
  - Introduce anyone off camera and ask the family to do the same
  - Identify a telephone number as backup in case there are connectivity issues
  - Establish how the communication will work at the start and agree the boundaries for confidentiality.
- Consider the use of other venues outside of the family home to connect, for examples schools.
- Contact with birth families for children in a variety of looked after arrangements (also adoption) with birth families has been identified as an area that requires considerable thought and planning. Consider what contact arrangements are needed and what resources are required to facilitate these safely (see resource list below for specific advice).

See Professional practice guidance for home visits during Covid-19 Pandemic for guidance on home visits

2. Organisational support for social workers

Top 10 Checklist

Here is a helpful *Top 10* checklist intended to *slow and order our thinking* when considering our own support (based on best practice and recent feedback from BASW members):

- Take *time* to reflect on your role.
- Where is your support coming from?

Signs of Safety, as one approach, helps us to order our thinking through the use of three questions:

1. What's working well for you?
2. What are you worried about?
3. What needs to happen for you?

- Lone working is a significant concern during this period and local protocols should be established. Use BASW and organisational guidance for home visits.
- Government guidance and local policies on record keeping should be followed. If you are working from home, ensure that you have been supplied with the correct equipment from your employer, including VPN to safely access online records. All decisions regarding contact during this period must be recorded accurately, including those involved in decision making. Also ensure you have "read and write" access to records. When reviewing safety plans ensure your recording in a brief way explains your actions or "workings out".
- Supervision continues to be vital and the use of technology will facilitate this, but one-one meetings will be strengthened by the use of virtual team meetings and group discussion.

- Stay connected.
- Find ways to critically reflect with others.
- Consider the impact of **moral distress and human rights:** The safety and wellbeing of practitioners is essential to enable provision of safe and effective support to the children and families they work with. The pandemic is already resulting in practitioners reporting high levels of anxiety and fear. Moral distress, that is the distress caused to practitioners when they are unable to do what they consider is right because of constraints such as the availability of resources, is likely to cause particular distress during the pandemic. Examples may include prioritising visiting families on your caseload in a way that leaves you feeling concerned about particular children. It is important this is recognised, recorded and reflected upon. Human rights breaches may be

a particular concern in the current context. Make sure you and the families you support have access to all the most up-to-date legal advice

- The above process of **Assess, Plan and Review** is a circular way of working where we have to test and learn from our practice including what children and families are telling us, this is particularly critical as we are in uncharted waters.

3. Additional support and resources for Children and Families and their social workers

For children and families

Coronavirus information for children, young people and families

https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/news/coronavirus-COVID-19-information-children-young-people-and-families

Coronavirus safety advice for survivors

https://www.womensaid.org.uk/COVID-19-coronavirus-safety-advice-for-survivors/

Signs of Safety Children's Services Support Group:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/SofSCSSG/?ref=share

Mencap easy read guidance on COVID-19

https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Info%20about%20COVID19%2026th%20March.pdf

The Family Rights Group provides a range of resources for families involved with children's social care including up-to-date legal advice

www.frg.org.uk

Safelives is a charity that provides advice and services on domestic abuse. This is being updated throughout this crisis

https://safelives.org.uk

For social workers

Coronavirus guidance

https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus

BASW information and guidance around Covid-19

https://www.basw.co.uk/coronaviruscovid-19-basw-updates

You can direct questions or concerns to BASW by contacting us

https://www.basw.co.uk/contact

BASW Survey for feedback on practice during Covid-19 https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2020/mar/social-work-during-coronavirus-covid-19ongoing-survey

BASW virtual activities to provide peer support and learning can be found here https://www.basw.co.uk/events

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