

British Association of Social Workers (BASW)

The role of social workers in a pandemic and its aftermath: learning from Covid-19

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During the Covid-19 crisis, social workers are responding to unprecedented situations and have had to adapt quickly and extensively to the health, social and economic dimensions of the crisis. In the UK, the social work response has been shaped primarily at local level, through local authorities, health and social care trusts and other employing and leading agencies, with some central government guidance. Social workers have been designated essential workers throughout.

Covid-19 in the UK has shown gaps in national pandemic preparedness in general, and in understanding of the role and requirements of social workers in such an emergency. There is great opportunity to learn from this and ensure the role of social workers is promoted further in public health, national disaster and emergency planning.

Nonetheless, social workers are playing and will continue to play an integral role in responding to the COVID -19 pandemic through direct support to people, providing as much continuity of service as possible and responding to new demands and expectations from people. Primary roles include being part of the multi-professional effort to reduce infection risks and related harms and having a key role in addressing the social and economic consequences of emergency measures such as 'lockdown', shielding, school and business closures, home working and severe travel restrictions.

At this point in the pandemic, there is opportunity to recognise and reflect on the role of social workers in the first 'phase' of the crisis (since March 2020 to the present time) and to look forward to the role of social workers in subsequent phases. This view is informed by international evidence and experiences of social work in disasters and emergencies, and by pre-existing work in the UK (by BASW and others) on the necessary role of social workers in the aftermath and recovery phases of crises.

Going forward, BASW advocates that the crucial role of social workers in overall public health and wellbeing strategy in this pandemic and its aftermath (and in subsequent disaster planning) should be better recognised and supported at national level, while social workers remain empowered to act to support the local communities, families and individuals they know well. Social workers are key to local response systems and should be supported better to deliver this in normal and extraordinary times.

BASW supports social work across the whole of the UK and promotes common professionalism and ethics across UK countries and fields of practice. Social workers' duties, skills, knowledge and expertise are also proving essential across the globe. BASW is supporting the gathering of evidence by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) about sustained good practice, innovation and adaptation in the face of a crisis.

The overarching human rights and safeguarding role of social workers

Social work is fundamentally a human rights-based profession. Social workers' ethics and purpose is grounded in upholding human rights. This is no different during times of crisis. In fact, during complex and uncertain times it is vital to hold firm to universal human rights.

The pandemic is exposing great inequality in impact and in human rights protection across the UK. The pressures arising from the pandemic and the difficulties in responding to these run the risk of undermining entitlements, reducing rights and removing safeguards. The starkest expressions of this are in the inequality of access to protection from abuse and neglect, access to treatment to sustain life, and the unequal and devastating death rates in our society.

Ethics and emergency legal powers

Emergency legislation has been introduced in each nation which affects social work, social care and health duties and use of resources. This is time limited emergency legislation but there are possible long-term impacts and implications. Issues of ethics, protecting rights and entitlements and sustaining high quality practice are critical for social work at this time.

The need for exceptional powers and arrangements in an emergency such as a pandemic is understood – although better preparedness could have reduced haste and improved due process of enactment.

Social workers' professional ethics and human rights protective role means during Covid-19 we will scrutinise changes to legislation and policy for their impact on people, the due process by which they are decided and implemented, the ethical guidance that accompanies them and the risk of disproportionality and over-extension (e.g. unnecessary renewal of rights-reducing powers).

In this context that BASW works to ensure the UK Code of Ethics (<https://www.basw.co.uk/about-basw/code-ethics>) and the international joint ethical principles of IFSW and the International Association of Schools for Social Work - remain at the core of social work's values base, practice, leadership and support to communities. Social workers should continue to work to their ethical and professional principles (as well as relevant regulatory standards) in any policy context.

Professional responsibilities

(Please also see the accompanying practice documents shared by Lena Dominelli who chairs the BASW specialist interest group on social work in disasters and emergencies).

Our professional responsibilities and use of expertise throughout all phases of the pandemic will include:

- Self-care and attention personal and professional wellbeing in challenging situations
- Maintaining professional integrity and professional standards
- Ensuring as much continuity in contact, support and services as possible, including through enhanced use of digital communications
- Using statutory powers well and maintaining highest ethical practice in an emergency, pressurised context
- Enabling children and adults to access the resources they need to maintain their health and wellbeing (e.g. under lockdown or shielding) through
 - provision of information
 - enabling access to relevant universal services
 - enabling access to their entitlements
 - acting to prevent and alleviate poverty including food poverty
 - outreach and establishing new, safe forms of communication e.g. through digital platforms
 - ensuring people can continue to access new and changes support if their circumstances change during the pandemic
- Identifying, responding to and ensuring ongoing support for people most at risk in the communities we serve including people who are
 - most marginalised and/or impoverished and/or poorly housed
 - least able to access information and services,
 - most at risk of harm from others at home or outside it, (safeguarding)
 - living with disabilities and/or underlying health conditions
 - refugees or migrants
 - otherwise at particular risk,
- Identifying and supporting informal family and friend carers
- Mobilising, connecting people and providing information about community, universal and secondary services and resources
- Supporting families and others directly affected by bereavement and loss because of COVID-19
- Promoting human rights throughout in practical ways including through
 - active advocacy,
 - use of legal and policy knowledge,
 - enabling people to voice their own needs and views,
- Promoting inclusive, ethical policies and practices e.g. within teams and organisations throughout Covid-19

This is not an exhaustive list but covers principle areas

Social workers in local emergency strategy and delivery partnerships

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To use their expertise effectively, social workers across the UK must be inducted and integrated into emergency planning arrangements at local and community level (e.g. local authority, health and social trusts, or wider, interagency health and care system). Social workers deploy their skills as individual practitioners and also through facilitating and co-ordinating integrated, strategic and operational emergency delivery of services.

Social services operates '24/7'. Identified strategic leads for social work emergency out of hours response teams should be included in all current COVID-19 emergency planning procedures with clearly identified functions and responsibilities including during and post emergency and recovery phases.

Social workers bring essential statutory knowledge and powers into local interagency emergency arrangements, upholding rights and protecting from harm including through safeguarding children and adult; Mental Health Act assessments, tackling domestic abuse and undertaking assessments of mental capacity.

To all of this they bring an ethical focus to maximise empowerment of people, enabling choice and control and co-production/'working with' even in the most pressed circumstances.

They can provide a unique, acute focus on the quality and accessibility of social care and social work services within multiagency emergency response systems. They must be enabled to continue reviewing and overseeing quality of provider care and risk issues for people (of all ages) in care and supported living facilities and other 'placements'. They must also be able to continue their quality review role in respect of social care delivered at home and through direct payments and personal assistants. Social care services may be disrupted during Covid-19 and social workers need to be able to remedy situations quickly and safely.

They distinctively advocate for, identify and support the most disadvantaged. They promote parity, equality and access of those in most need of support, overcoming communication barriers and using advanced relationship building skills to work with affected individuals and families (including sharing difficult news), signposting and enabling and supporting individuals, families and communities in coping with difficult traumatic circumstances.

Social workers are the cornerstone to supporting community sustainability during the initial phases of this emergency and will need to be central to this in the recovery response. Working closely with communities will be vital in the recovery and reconstruction phases of the pandemic.

Social workers in 'phases' of this pandemic

Exactly how the risks and impacts of Covid-19 in the UK will change over time is unknown and impacted by many factors including:

- The success of 'lockdown' and ongoing social distancing measures
- Track and trace systems
- Resolution of institution-based transmission risks especially in hospitals and care homes

- Resolution of community based transmission, including those living in supported living and accessing domiciliary support
- Impact of health inequalities
- Treatments and a vaccine

Whatever the unfolding detail, social workers are and will be central to the different phases and changes within this pandemic.

The term 'phases' is used quite loosely here and may be revised in subsequent versions. Phases should not be seen as strictly sequential nor part of a uniform experience for all. They are indicative.

Social workers' roles and tasks at different phases include:

Role and tasks for social workers in supporting people	'Phase'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Information sharing about minimising initial spread of COVID 19 	<p>From the start of pandemic and ongoing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Immediate support and relief. Practical and emotional. Includes specific support for bereavement and illness experiences. Includes adapting social work tasks to pandemic experiences e.g. safeguarding in lockdown. 	<p>From the start and into recovery and reconstruction.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recovery - emotional and practical support. Includes reflecting and learning. May include recognition of trauma and emotional impact of experience. <p>For social workers may include dealing with pent up demand for social work services after e.g. schools return, lockdown loosens and behaviours normalise</p>	<p>As the initial crisis eases, deaths and infections decrease and initial control measures are loosened.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reconstruction – moving from learning to actions and building a 'new normal'. For social work, importance of identifying better practices and services in light of Covid-19 experience 	<p>As crisis eases further and people start to look to the longer term – including policy makers, professional leaders.</p>

➤ Preparedness and secondary prevention – from learning into action to prevent a new outbreak	Throughout but gains emphasis in the ‘new normal’ ensuring prevention measures and behaviours
➤ Rituals of reflection and remembrance – supporting ongoing and collective grief and trauma	When the time is right; in the reflecting, learning and ‘new normal’ phases
➤ Working with communities to support local resilience and ongoing recovery for the long term	Throughout but gains emphasis in the ‘new normal’ – core to future social work
Ongoing self-care - physical, emotional and mental wellbeing - throughout	Throughout but gains emphasis in recovery and reconstruction

Supporting social workers

Throughout, social workers must be well supported. This includes

- Effective supervision and management through all ‘phases’ of the pandemic and the listening ear of local leaders
- Provision of clear advice and resources for the health and safety risks of their work
- Working arrangements that enable safety, effectiveness and wellbeing at different points in the pandemic
- Ongoing training and information
- Access to the right IT equipment and digital facilities to optimise remote working e.g. from home or outreaching to people online

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