Practice Toolkit for Social Workers in Times of Transformation:

A Reflective Activist Approach

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Background

Empowering Social Workers in Challenging Times: Learning from Best Practice during Covid-19, co-funded by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account (ESRC IAA), has brought together a group of social work practitioners and academics to seek knowledge that supports social workers to meet the challenges created by COVID-19. In this project, practitioner researchers from the BASW UK Social Work Practitioner Research Network and academic researchers from Durham University co-analysed the data collected from the BASW's *Ongoing Survey on Social Work during Covid-19* (link, refer to BASW survey hereafter) and co-produced this toolkit.

The full report (link) has captured the challenges and best practice that social workers experienced during the first national lockdown in the UK. Findings highlighted the importance of (1) professional problem solving; (2) ethical social work and (3) professional transformation (adapt or push back) for coping with the shock, chaos and risks brought to social work practice by COVID-19. Reflective exercises included in this toolkit are designed to support reflection and planning for action in relation to these specific topics. With the help of the toolkit, we aim to support individual social workers and their supervisors to consolidate their learning through COVID-19.

Use of the Toolkit

This practice toolkit introduces a set of reflective exercises to help social workers and their supervisors explore immediate practical challenges, wider organisational issues and the policy assumptions that might support/impede ethical and effective practice as we work through the impact of COVID-19.

Through systematic and connective reflection, we aim to support social workers and their employers to (i) build connections and peer support much needed for problem solving; and (ii) develop the ethical and critical capacity to acknowledge/address the impact of policy and politics on social work practice. The practice toolkit can be used by individual social workers or by supervisors in routine one-to-one or team supervision:

- to support individual social workers to identify their own best practice;
- to reflect on how the employing organisation can help develop the emerging skills, knowledge and culture that are necessary for upholding and developing social work's professional standards and integrity;
- to build a critical awareness of how social policies and politics around social work can shape our everyday practice and problem solving.

If the toolkit is used in supervision or in peer groups, ground rules must be agreed by participants to ensure the following principles are respected:

- Confidentiality
- Mutual respect
- Kindness and care
- Learning orientation

It is advisable to read this toolkit in conjunction with the full report.

A 'Reflective Activist Approach'

'Being your own activist' sums up pretty much how social workers have been responding to challenges presented by COVID-19. Our research has demonstrated how social workers had transformed their professional practice during COVID-19, from coping with initially chaotic change to seeking ways to do 'proper social work' and to their resistance to normalising social distance and digital practice by default. The core driver for all these changes is social workers' commitment to the professional values and their ability to reflect on and change their practice in order to do the 'right thing' for the people they serve. This finding informs the construction of the following 'steering wheel of reflection-action-reflection' which captures how social workers reflect in and on their practice (**blue** triangle) and act to address ethical and practical challenges (**orange** and **green** triangles) and create a different professional future (**purple** triangle) (see figure 1).
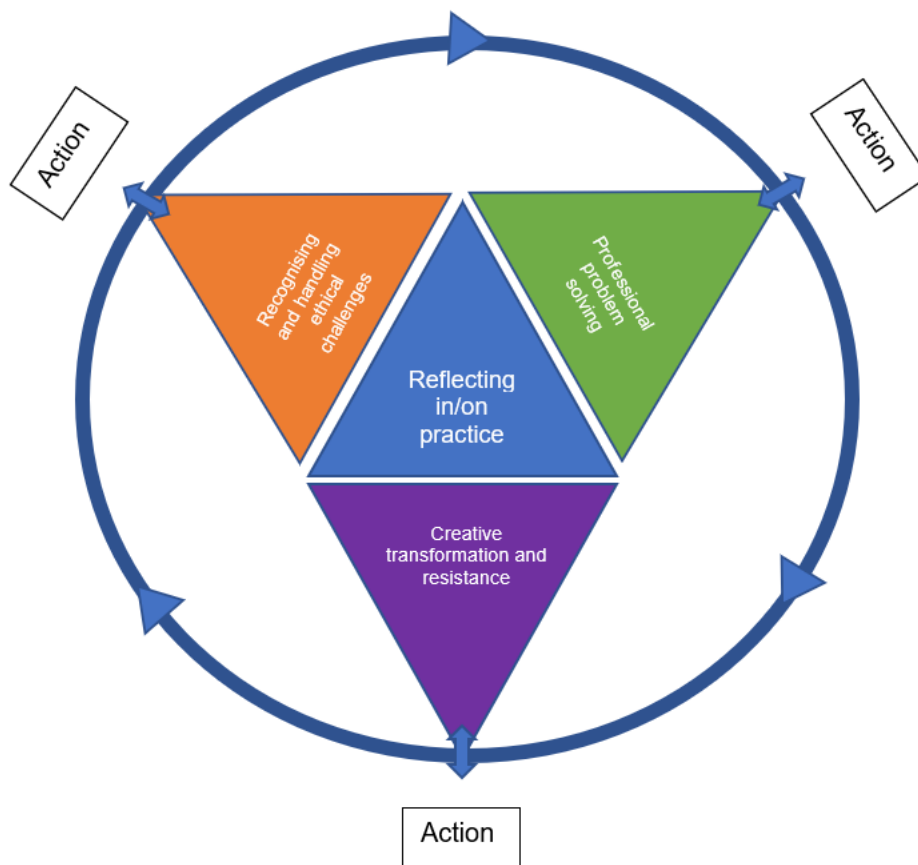

Figure 1 The Steering Wheel of Reflection-Action-Reflection

The 'Reflective Activist Approach' can be likened to a vehicle, steered by committed social workers (with the help of the steering wheel created in this project), to 'do proper social work' as we transition from COVID-19 to managing post pandemic - times. It encourages social workers and their supervisors to systematically reflect on the practical and ethical challenges presented by COVID-19, and to link them to the organisational policies and societal structures that might enable/impede their identified right course of action. This approach, therefore, employs reflection for two main functions: (1) **identifying opportunities for reclaiming social work values** in everyday practice (Healy, 2014), and (2) **maintaining a critical consciousness** of structural inequalities and how they impact on professional practice (Pease, 2013). The enhanced critical and ethical capacity aims to aid social workers to adapt work with people using services to ensure the realisation of social justice, human rights, diversity and inclusion through their professional practice.

Area 1: Professional Problem Solving

COVID-19 has disrupted the way social work is practised and brought a lot of uncertainties to social workers, service users, carers and communities. To cope with the initially chaotic situation, innovative social work practices began to emerge quickly in March 2020 in the UK and continued to evolve with the 'pandemic trio': the health impact of the pandemic; the government's responses; and the wider social impact that the pandemic has had on the UK society.

Social work organisations and individual social workers learned, adjusted and innovated in order to carry on practising social work to the highest possible standard. However, working from home and assessing complex needs and risks remotely increased the level of anxiety, compounded by a lack of physical connection with colleagues, either at work or through shared learning and training events. To enable professional problem solving, rebuilding communication and connections has become pivotal.

Our research has captured the best practice for addressing some of the key challenges experienced by social workers during the first national lockdown:

- **Enhancing effective communication:** Clear practical guidance; transparency in information sharing and decision making; effective systems and equipment for information sharing and communication with service users and colleagues;
- **Building social connection and support:** Active listening; building a sense of connectedness and a supportive and caring work culture;
- **Creating learning and training opportunities:** Relevant continuous professional development for mandatory training, for new skills and best practice; and collective learning through peer sharing.

Reflective activity 1 – Communication and Connection

Aims: Building social workers' peer connection and developing reflection and communication skills.

Format: This activity is suitable for individual reflection and collective reflection in team meetings/group supervision/training sessions.

   a) Individual reflection can take place at a time and in a location that suits the individual.

   b) Group reflective sessions can take place in a variety of formats (some common models for reflection are available at https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/models). In this exercise, we introduce a new alternative approach which is the Reflective Connections Model (Maclean & Cafferty, 2020) designed in response to the need to virtually connect social work teams at the beginning of COVID-19 (operational details, please see Appendix 1).

Participating workers can *EITHER* recall a situation where they were on a home visit / in a meeting /on a video or phone call with an individual and they felt the tension in the conversation *OR* use the scenarios (1.1, 1.2 and 1.3) provided in this activity for reflection. For each scenario, consider the questions listed at the end of this box.

Scenario 1.1 Working with users

Social workers from child protection services always need to tread a fine line between support and protection. Trust between social workers and the child and their family is key to successful assessment and intervention. However, working remotely during COVID-19 changed how relationships and trust could be built in professional practice. A child protection worker consulted a mother by telephone about the safeguarding concerns that had been raised relating to her experiencing of domestic violence. When the mother was asked to change to video call for a 'house tour' in order to assess the suitability and cleanliness of the home environment, she was very annoyed and did not want to speak to the social worker any more.

Scenario 1.2 Working with colleagues

A social worker had just joined a new team at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. He found it very difficult to meet new colleagues and build relationships with his peers and supervisors via Skype/Teams. This was made more difficult when some frontline staff were off sick or over-burdened with increased workload. The social worker was also concerned as he had received advice from his new supervisor on a particular piece of work with a service user. He thought this was contradictory to the advice he had received from his previous supervisor under similar circumstances. He wanted to challenge the views of the new supervisor but felt a lack of confidence in doing so.

> **Scenario 1.3 Working in partnership with other services or disciplines**
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> During the pandemic, a mental health social worker expressed concerns about how she could carry out her statutory duties properly and safely. After talking to the team, she still found very little guidance about how to minimise the risk of infection particularly in relation to Mental Health Act assessments carried out in the community and in hospital. She was expected to go to the hospital's Accident and Emergency Department (an area where suspected COVID-19 cases were waiting to be seen) to conduct a Mental Health Act Assessment without any personal protective equipment. When patients were discharged, no COVID-19 tests were conducted before they went back to the community. Meanwhile, many community health services stopped visiting people at home due to the pandemic. The mental health social worker is due to have a multi-agency meeting, and she was wondering how to address the problems encountered while also maintaining a good working relationship with partners.
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> **Reflection/Discussion prompts:**
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> 1. What communication skills did/could you use at this point in the scenario to lessen the tension/communicate the challenges?
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> 2. What other communication skills could be used? Is there a different approach that may help to diffuse the feelings of tension?
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> 3. How invested do you feel people were/might be in the conversation?
>
> 4. How did you feel/might you have felt in this conversation? How do you think others might have felt? What might you do to acknowledge and address your feelings and emotions?
>
> 5. What support or/and training might help you if faced with a similar situation in the future?

Area 2: Recognising and handling ethical challenges

Professional problem solving inevitably involves taking account of the ethical dimensions of social work, which are ever-present. However, working during a pandemic raises specific ethical challenges for social workers, as they attempt to practise in uncharted and difficult circumstances according to core social work values and ethical principles based on human rights, social justice and professional integrity (see BASW 2021; IFSW, 2018).

Respondents to the BASW survey (Kong et al, 2021) and the International Federation of Social Workers' survey on ethical challenges (Banks et al, 2020a), show the enormous efforts made by many social workers to work out how to practise ethically during Covid-19 restrictions. Key questions underlying their accounts include:

- How can we respect the rights and dignity of service users, while minimising the risk of harm from potential exposure to Covid-19, as well as from the risk of social isolation and lack of services?

- How should we prioritise the pressing needs of different people, when services and resources are limited?

- Should we adhere to blanket agency and/or government guidance about, for example, not conducting home visits or full assessments, or should we use our professional discretion?

Examples of everyday ethical challenges and dilemmas include:

- Would a home visit to a very isolated and vulnerable person be justified, or too risky?
- In deciding whether to talk to children in a garden about moving from a foster home while potentially being overheard by neighbours, should we be more concerned about breaching confidentiality or about respecting their rights to a face-to-face conversation?
- Should a social worker advocate for a young woman living in a residential home to be allowed to go for walks outside as a way of coping with her anger, despite blanket rules against this being applied to keep everyone safe?

In 'normal times' we tend to be alert to situations that may raise ethical challenges or dilemmas, and we often have some experience of deciding what to do and taking action. In the new times of living and working with Covid-19, past experience is no longer a reliable guide. We may have to 'go back to basics', revisiting first principles and asking questions such as: 'If I am to treat this person with as much respect as possible, what can I do in these restricted circumstances, and are all the restrictions justified?'

Doing this kind of ethical work requires not only the capacity and time to undertake *ethical reasoning* (balancing different rights, risks and needs, weighing harms and benefits). It also calls for *ethical vigilance* (being alert and sensitive to the ethical dimensions of practice when under pressure), alongside the deployment of e*thical logistics* (working strategically and practically to promote service users' welfare and respect their rights under restricted conditions) (see Rutter and Banks, 2021).

Reflective activity 2 – Ethical awareness and action

Aim: To build ethical awareness and the capacity to practise ethically in times of rapid changes.

Format: This activity is suitable for individual reflection and collective reflection in team meetings/group supervision/training sessions.

Consider the three scenarios outlined. Scenarios 2.1 and 2.2 are based on examples given by respondents in the BASW and IFSW surveys. The last scenario (2.3) calls for members of a social work team or discussion group to give an account of an ethical challenge or dilemma they have faced or are facing. For each scenario, consider the questions listed at the end of this box.

Scenario 2.1

A children and families social worker was on a video call to a woman who had requested help regarding domestic violence. This had safeguarding implications for the children in the household. Halfway through the call the social worker became aware that the partner (the perpetrator) was present and listening in on the call.

Scenario 2.2
A local authority adoption social worker and colleagues from other agencies had made all the necessary preparations for a long-awaited adoption of a baby to take place. The introductions had started and the baby was just about to move from the foster carer's home when a national lockdown was announced. The local authority response was to suspend all new adoption placements. The local authority social worker and other professionals involved had to decide what to do. Although the lockdown had started from the day of the government announcement, the law implementing the lockdown would not come into force for a few days. One of the foster parents was ill and needed the baby to move. She had prepared her four-year old daughter and the adoptive parents were ready. The adoptive parents had been waiting a long time and were ideally matched with the baby.

Scenario 2.3
Briefly describe an ethical challenge or dilemma experienced in your own work, when you had to make a difficult decision about what to do in a situation where matters of rights, responsibilities, harms and benefits were at stake. Then discuss it with colleagues using the list of questions below.

Reflection/Discussion prompts
1. ***What are the ethical issues in this situation****?* Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgementally due to our own stress and anxiety? (***ethical vigilance***)
2. ***What is the right course of action in this situation***? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties? (***ethical reasoning***)
3. ***How can we carry out the right course of action?*** In the context of risks and re-strictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed? (***ethical logistics***)

Area 3: Creative transformation and professional activism

COVID-19 has accelerated changes in the UK society, including widening social inequalities, stimulating normalisation of 'digital by default' in health and care practices and introducing a degree of social disconnection into our everyday lives. These changes have led to both adaptation and resistance from social work practitioners. From May to July 2020, there were more social workers showing newly-established hybrid work patterns. For example, rotation of working from home and going back to the office, forming of colleague bubbles, resuming home visits safely and creatively and developing support for those who are digitally excluded. Meanwhile, we have also seen resistance against 'digital by default' and the normalisation of social

disconnection, which developed as significant parts of the social work 'new normal'.

To stay ethically vigilant and practically innovative, social workers need to promote critical awareness of social inequalities and social exclusion and be aware of the impact of policies/politics on their practice. The following activity aims to support your reflection on how the issues arising from everyday practice during COVID-19 can be a result of social inequalities and the government's approach to social problems.

Reflective activity 3 – critical awareness and professional activism

Aim: To build critical awareness of the impact of social inequalities and social policies on social work practice during COVID-19.

Format: This activity is suitable for individual reflection and collective reflection in team meetings/group supervision/training sessions. The following scenarios are based on examples from the BASW Survey, and social workers should be encouraged to bring their own examples of practical-ethical challenges for reflection. Consider the questions listed at the end of each scenario.

Scenario 3.1 Awareness of social inequalities

Social workers in a drop-in centre for people with learning disability were told to shut the centre down when the pandemic hit. They moved everything online as fast as they could in order to carry on supporting people using the service. However, some service users completely disengaged from the new digital practice while some could not engage because of the lack of access to smart devices or Wi-Fi coverage in their area. The challenges were compounded by users' deprivation of resources and skills for protecting themselves and others during the pandemic, for example, maintaining social distance in shared housing, wearing masks and washing hands properly, etc.

1. What social inequalities can be identified in this scenario?

2. What could social workers do to support the drop-in centre/tackle the social inequalities?

Scenario 3.2 Awareness of organisational culture

A social worker from the Children and Families Services of a Local Authority came to the conclusion that it would not be ethical to assess the needs of a 16 year old girl remotely. There were potential risks of abuse and self-harming behaviours, and the social worker wanted to maintain a positive relationship with the girl to facilitate easier disclosure of safeguarding issues. When the social worker came up with the idea of using socially distanced walks for a 'face-to-face' meeting to confidentially explore these issues, she started to think about possible consequences – would walking around with the service users and carrying out an assessment outdoors be considered unprofessional by her manager?

1. Why do you think the social worker would have such worries?

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2. What do you think can be done to ease the worries that the social worker had in this scenario (e.g. organisational and peer culture and support)?

Scenario 3.3 Awareness of the impact of social policy and possibilities for professional activism

An experienced social worker from Adult Services was supporting an individual who lived alone and required assistance with aspects of their personal care. When the personal carers were ill or the services experienced disruption, the social worker began to make links with local community groups including self-organised groups of volunteers, churches and some community action groups in order to ensure some continuity of care for the service user. On the one hand, her manager raised some concerns about the move from a casework to a community model of practice; while on the other hand, the social worker wondered about their legal and professional position to share users' information with members of a local community group to promote person-centred practice.

1. Do you have an example of practising differently during COVID-19?

2. What were the challenges that you/the social worker encountered when they practised differently?

3. What learning can you take away from this experience? How can this be used in a post pandemic context?

Appendix 1 The Reflective Connections Model
(adapted from Maclean & Cafferty (2020))

Reflective Connections sessions were developed by Siobhan Maclean and Bridget Cafferty (University of Chester) in response to the need to virtually connect social work teams during COVID-19. The Reflective Connections Model promotes the development of reflective skills through using a model to structure the reflection, which is also useful for keeping focus within what can be a large group of people where the coordinator must be mindful of the time.

The sessions are designed to develop breadth of reflection rather than depth, which is usually the aim of group reflective sessions where one person presents a detailed case for everyone else to reflect on. In this model, each person presents their reflection and actively listens to the others. This model focuses on shared experiences drawn out from across the reflections, to strengthen connections. This is done by the coordinator who identifies themes, similarities, creativity and learning from across the reflections, and then reflects them back to the group.

Reflective Connections sessions follow a specific structure:

BEFORE THE SESSION
- **The coordinator** sends out an email beforehand to those attending a Reflective Connections session with a PowerPoint attached. This introduces the session to the participating workers so that they understand how the session will be run and what is expected of them.
- Principles of confidentiality, mutual respect, kindness and care and learning orientation should be emphasised at this stage.
- **Each person** decides upon their own reflection – this can be guided by giving a set topic to reflect on (e.g. a specific piece of work; something that went well; something that has been a challenge; practising during COVID-19) or using the scenarios and reflective prompts given in Activity 1 (p. 6).

DURING THE SESSION
- **The coordinator** introduces the session and how the session will run. They explain that they will be writing notes throughout in order to feed back on the emerging themes and connections. Boundaries are set in respect of confidentiality, and not giving advice to others.
- **The person presenting** gives a short introduction of what they did, and then uses one of two models to reflect on their experience (around 5 minutes). Typically, the head, heart and hands model (Ingram, 2013) or the surprises to learning model (Hicks and Koprowska, 1998) are used, but any models can be introduced. Having two models offers a choice for the workers and allows them to decide which they feel more comfortable using.
- **The coordinator** ensures that each person has finished their reflection and thanks them for their contribution. An invitation is given to others to share any reflections from what they have just heard.
- The session continues through listening to each person's reflection and thanking them for their contribution.
- After everyone has contributed and reflected, **the coordinator** will feed back their observations regarding the themes and connections observed within the session.
- The session then finishes with a further discussion amongst the group as to the connections and themes shared, and any further thoughts and reflections the workers have.

AFTER THE SESSION

- Following the session written feedback is sent out to the workers so that they can later reflect upon the session. The feedback is anonymous and only covers the main themes and connections identified.

Benefits of Reflective Connections

- Running reflective connections sessions can offer a safe and supported space for workers to reflect on their practice and connect with their team or with others. Sharing the connections and themes identified amongst the workers is rewarding not only for the workers as they report feeling a sense of understanding and empathy amongst their peers, but also for the coordinator who is privileged to hear people's personal reflections and feelings.
- There are valuable elements of good practice being carried out that shine through the reflections, which are fed back to the workers and can be used to feed back to others within the Department about some of the good practice being carried out in the field.

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