

## **Health and Safety during Covid-19: Position Statement**

Developed by the Social Workers Union and endorsed by BASW UK.

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### **Background**

The Social Workers Union (SWU) is a specialist union for social workers with 13000 members.

SWU is affiliated to the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU).

SWU members have expressed concerns about safety at work during the Covid-19 pandemic. The professional association for social work and social workers, BASW, which has a memorandum of understanding with SWU, is producing ethical and practice guidance. Both SWU and BASW are lobbying government and those leading Covid-19 strategy for appropriate equipment, advice, support and resources for social workers.

This position statement sets out SWU's position as a Trade Union on health and safety at work. The position statement is based on GFTU's position and reflects TUC advice. It is endorsed by BASW.

The position statement is for members of SWU and is useful for all social workers.

The position statement can be used to:

- Guide and inform your practice
- Request appropriate support from your employer, trade union and professional body (BASW)
- Foster peer support in teams and multiagency collaboration

**Understanding of health and safety through this pandemic is developing. This is a new threat to health and research findings are emerging. This advice will be updated as more information becomes available.**

**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 the regulator and their employer.**

## Position Statement

### 1. Introduction

Social workers are an essential part of the public sector workforce at all times and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. They are recognised as key workers by UK governments and provide a vital public service.

Employers must ensure health and safety standards are upheld for social workers during this period and give particular consideration to the needs and tasks of social workers.

The coronavirus is an infectious virus that causes Covid-19 disease. It is most often transmitted through airborne virus from an infected person to another (e.g. coughs, sneezes and exhalation), entering via nose, mouth or eyes. Social distancing governmental advice means staying at least two metres apart to reduce the risk of airborne transmission. Used consistently, scientific evidence recommends this helps to prevent transmission by symptomatic and asymptomatic people.

It can be picked up from surfaces (where it can stay live for between a few hours and three days) and be transferred to the face. For these reasons, NHS England's core infection prevention advice is:

#### Do

- wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
- use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- wash your hands as soon as you get back home
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- put used tissues in the bin immediately and wash your hands afterwards

#### Don't

- do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean

**The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974** states it is the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is possible, the health, safety and welfare of all its employees. General advice on health and safety and other issues during coronavirus is available on the ACAS website at <https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus>

The following sections set out key areas where action should be taken to minimise the risk on staff and members of the public.

Social workers need local health and safety protocols and management support to

- protect themselves
- protect and reassure people they work with.

## **2. Advice and guidance for social workers in community work with individuals and families**

Social workers should receive clear advice and guidance on the risks of Covid-19 (and all relevant matters) from their employers.

This should be based on Public Health guidance and, for social workers, should take account of the regulatory standards social workers need to follow, other governmental advice and guidance from their professional association, BASW.

There is currently no specific Public Health or governmental guidance for social workers on working practices during Covid-19 such as safety protocols, quality, types and use of PPE (e.g. for social work in the community, doing home visits etc).

These gaps in national pandemic advice for social workers have been identified by SWU and BASW and are being raised urgently with government.

Members should follow the BASW Home Visit guidance for social workers published 3/04/2020 updated Nov 30 2020 (and subsequent advice for other areas of practice) laying out steps to be taken to optimise safety. This emphasises:

- The need for effective local management and supervisory protocols and support
- Use of digital and telephone contacts in place of face to face except in absolutely essential situations
- Risk assessment of every visit/encounter in respect of Covid-19 infection risk
- Maintaining social distancing during the visit/encounter
- Joint work with other professions (e.g. police, health staff) to manage proximity and safety
- Access to PPE (see section 4) – including hand sanitiser, gloves, masks, eye protection, aprons – as an option to manage risk, and an understanding of how to use these if social distancing or alternatives to visiting are not available AND the visit is absolutely essential

In the absence of Public Health advice for social work, Public Health advice for primary care, home care, supported living and residential care settings may be useful, depending on the social work task.

All Public health guidance can be found here

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-residential-care-supported-living-and-home-care-guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-supported-living-provision>

## **3. Access to personal protective equipment (PPE)**

SWU and BASW are very well aware of the national lack of access to PPE (and training/advice on how to use it) for most social workers. There is a national shortage.

Social workers are due to receive PPE from the national distribution after prioritisation of staff in the NHS and social care (homecare and residential settings). At time of writing, some social workers have received PPE already, depending on local distribution arrangements. The availability of PPE is largely beyond the control of individual employers of social workers and depends on national distribution. SWU and BASW are working to get PPE distributed to social workers.

SWU acknowledges the attempts being made by employers to access PPE for their staff and they should continue to do this by all means.

Key points to remember:

- PPE is not an alternative to other safety measures, but rather a last resort when risks can't be managed in other ways.
- Any equipment you're given must be appropriate to the situation and suitable for your size and needs. If it is not available, then the relevant task should not be undertaken until it becomes available
- If your employer tells you to wear safety equipment, you must do so. If you don't, you may face disciplinary action. You must not be charged for this equipment.
- If you think you need safety equipment that hasn't been provided, or that your equipment is defective, in poor condition, poorly fitting or unsuitable, or if you've been asked to pay for your protective equipment, you should approach a safety rep or your union rep immediately to raise the issue. SWU will support members who have a dispute with their employers in respect of PPE and whether or not work practices are safe.

**Further advice for social workers during on Covid-19 is on the [coronavirus pages of the BASW website](#) and will be provided by SWU from time to time.**

#### **4. Advice and Guidance for social workers in 'usual' places of work**

Governmental advice endorsed by SWU is that everyone should work from home and stay at home wherever possible (see section 5)

Some social work tasks throughout this period will require social workers to attend workplaces, private homes and other facilities.

Members who are required to attend usual places of work (e.g. offices) during the pandemic should have clear health and safety measures in place during these times. These measures should follow the latest Public Health guidance and include the following:

- Updated risk assessments should be completed for any areas of operation where staff are working, with specific attention to identifying actions necessary to prevent dangers in regard to the spread of COVID-19. Any worker has the right to see a copy of the risk assessment for the work area they are expected to work in.
- Social distancing – members should not be sitting next to, behind, or in front of other colleagues. Desk sharing should be halted if full infection control cannot be guaranteed (e.g. through antiseptic clean between uses)
- In an operational environment, social distancing should be maintained with colleagues and when dealing with members of the public/people using services. If necessary, physical changes to the workplace to enable this distancing should be actioned (e.g. using larger rooms or glass barriers if appropriate)
- Face to face meetings should not occur with other professionals. Digital communications such as skype should be used as the norm.
- Social distancing should be observed in break out areas, and adequate space must be provided for this to happen.
- Office cleanliness is of vital importance such as desk areas, break out areas, and toilets.
- Anti-viral cleaning wipes for surfaces and equipment should be provided for all staff and deep cleaning should be done regularly

- Anti-viral (usually alcohol-based) gels should be provided, there should be enough of these and they should be in-date.

This is not an exhaustive list and additional measures may also need to be in place.

Social work managers should exercise flexibility, pragmatism and good health and safety practice in terms of allocation of work, locations and staffing numbers required for essential tasks.

If transport is used, staff should be enabled to follow Public Health guidance. For car use, this includes wherever practicable only one person per vehicle.

## **5. Working from home**

Governmental advice endorsed by SWU is that everyone should work from home and stay at home wherever possible and very many social workers have made this move.

For many this will be the first experience we have of working from home, especially for an extended period. It is important that proper processes are followed in the home and the employer still has a responsibility for our Health and Safety.

Maintaining remote team connections while staff are working from home is essential. Maintaining a virtual team through skype/teleconference facilities provides support and peer supervision and helps prevent isolation and anxiety.

If virtual team meetings etc. are not in place, social workers should ask their managers for facilities and time in the working week to achieve this.

Some social work can be done successfully from home, particularly using digital technologies and telephones. Social workers need access to the right technologies and internet connectivity to enable work from offices, from home and when mobile if this is necessary. The Covid-19 crisis has made this even more essential.

Some work at home including remote contact with the people using services may bring difficult and distressing issues into people's homes. The need for supervision and easy access to debrief is an important part of protecting social worker health and wellbeing.

All members are advised to follow safe and confidential practice in their homes and follow their employer's guidance on home working.

For those members who have reasonable adjustments in the workplace these should also be provided in the homes.

## **6. Raising concerns**

Health and Safety regulations give specific protections to staff particularly if in imminent danger. These extend to social workers having the right to remove themselves from situations/ home visits that they reasonably believe pose a serious and imminent danger to themselves or members of the public.

If you believe that this is the case then you should notify your line manager immediately, inform them of the risks, and let them know the actions you believe need to be taken to protect yourself, colleagues and the public.

If you have concerns with health and safety, this needs to be reported to your line manager immediately.

If you are a member of SWU or BASW, you can notify the Advice and Representation Service on 0121 622 8413.

## **7. Conclusion**

SWU with BASW will continue to lobby and campaign nationally to make sure measures are in place to protect the health and wellbeing of members and wider social work.

To find out more about our work to support social workers, please visit:

<https://www.basw.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-basw-updates>

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