

# Response ID ANON-H2VY-YAJB-F

Submitted to Wellbeing and living with COVID protection measures  
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## Questions

### 1 How do you feel at this point in the COVID-19 pandemic?

Please give us your views:

The Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW) is part of the British Association of Social Workers, the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. BASW UK has 21,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings. There are over 10,000 registered social workers in Scotland around 1,500 of whom are SASW members. This comprises staff working in local government and the independent sector, across health and social care, education, children and families, justice services, as well as a growing number of independent practitioners.

SASW's key aims are:

- Improved professional support, recognition, and rights at work for social workers,
- Better social work for the benefit of people who need our services, and
- A fairer society

Social work is a complex profession. In legislation it is empowered to act and work with people made vulnerable by their circumstances. It balances their rights with those of others and considers the risks of their actions on themselves, their families and wider society. Social work sees people in their own individual context. It recognises individual relationships, strengths, challenges and human rights to safety and protection. We work with individuals and groups who are often on the edges of society who are far less likely to campaign or lobby about their rights, and who struggle to stay afloat when the scaffolding of support is stripped away.

We welcome the opportunity to share the views and experiences of social workers in relation to the coronavirus measures.

The British Association of Social Work carried out a UK wide survey of social workers between 30th November and 31st December 2021. The number of respondents from Scotland was 103 and their views are the most recent we have in relation to the current stage of the pandemic.

Overall, 47.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to carry out their role with the confidence and support they need at this stage of the pandemic. This is still a worryingly high percentage of the workforce in Scotland who, almost two years into the pandemic, do not feel they have the help or resources needed to perform their role to the level needed and expected of them. Furthermore, a survey by the Social Worker's Union (SWU) for LBC Radio revealed that 35.71% of Scottish respondents answered 'not at all' to the question of whether they felt they could do their job to the standard they wanted to.

There is evidently widespread concern in the workforce about the number of people who are 'falling through the gaps' and not receiving the support they need. In the same survey carried out by SWU, 39.29% of respondents from Scotland said they had been unable to reach the most vulnerable people during the pandemic.

This is backed up by the fact that 85.4% of respondents to our recent survey agreed or strongly agreed that they had encountered more difficulties in accessing essential support services for the people with whom they work. Additionally, 76.7% of social workers pointed to difficulties in communicating with service users because of the service users' digital exclusion as a recurring problem.

As society looks toward the 'new normal' there will need to be serious consideration given to how backlogs in service demand and the digital divide exasperated by the pandemic are both addressed. Both of these issues are currently heaping demands on social workers and resulting in extremely high caseloads which only risks worsening.

In particular, respondents expressed serious concerns around the impact of covid measures on the protection of vulnerable children and adults. 80.5% agreed or strongly agreed that their concerns about the capacity to safeguard and protect adults and children have increased since March 2020. In addition, 52.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they had encountered more difficulties in carrying out effective adult and child protection visits because of limited face-to-face access.

Building and maintaining strong relationships and levels of trust with service users is a fundamental aspect of good social work practice. Steps therefore need to be taken to allow social workers to carry out this part of their role more often as we emerge from the pandemic.

One area of improvement compared to the start of the pandemic has been access to Personal Protective Equipment. 68.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their access to Personal Protective Equipment and risk management advice had improved since March 2020. It's reassuring to know that social workers are feeling more confident to carry out face-to-face visits and not be faced with ethical dilemmas which most experienced in the early stages of the pandemic.

### 2 How do you feel thinking about the year ahead?

Please give us your views:

The Social Worker's Union recently carried out a study in January 2022 which identified that almost half of the respondents from Scotland (42.86%) were considering leaving their role in social work.

The survey also highlighted that, UK wide, 94% of social workers expected to see referrals increase over the next year, with 71% describing their caseloads as likely to be 'inundated'.

The significantly increasing pressures due to the continued surge in workload is undoubtedly having a severe impact on the mental health and wellbeing of social workers and driving a lot of the people out of the profession. Indeed, BASW's survey of Scottish members at the end of 2021 found that 59.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that working during the pandemic had negatively impacted their own mental health.

As a result, many social workers are understandably feeling stressed and anxious about the year ahead as they reflect on the incredibly difficult working situations they face and the impact this is likely to have on individuals and families who need support. Knowing that their colleagues are considering leaving the profession is undoubtedly adding more strain given the fact that the workforce is already struggling to cope without having high levels of staff turnover to also contend with.

The high likelihood of burnout, either experienced by themselves or co-workers, is leading to poor morale amongst the workforce. BASW's survey of Scottish members at the end of 2021 revealed that 71.9% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Covid-19 crisis had adversely affected workplace morale in their place of employment.

Overall, it would be fair to say that social workers are approaching this year with a lot of apprehension as they brace themselves for increasing workloads in the knowledge that the profession is already fragile due to feeling exhausted and demoralised.

### 3 Which protective measures do you find the easiest to follow and why?

Please give us your views:

Measures such as wearing a face covering, wearing of PPE, regular testing, maintaining good hand hygiene and social distancing are relatively straightforward measures that can be followed to allow for face-to-face visits to take place safely.

Direct contact with individuals is an essential component of social work practice, especially when it comes to strengthening trust and relationships. Therefore, simple measures that can be used to facilitate visits without putting either social workers or service users at risk should continue to be in place.

There would, however, be concerns from BASW about any moves toward introducing mandatory vaccinations for social workers. Whilst vaccination is an important protective measure in preventing the transmission of Covid-19, we don't believe that mandatory vaccination would be a proportionate approach.

Indeed, introducing mandatory vaccination could risk hardening concerns and increasing hesitancy towards receiving the vaccine. It may also lead to vacancies in the workforce at a time when it is already severely overworked and stretched, which in turn impacts on availability of services for those most in need.

As mentioned in question one, access to PPE for social workers has improved, as well as access to testing kits. Therefore, continuing to provide this level of protection for social workers whilst ensuring that guidance for face-to-face visits is routinely reviewed and updated are simple ways to keep the workforce safe.

### 4 Which protective measures do you find the hardest to follow and why?

Please give us your views:

A survey carried out by King's College London from May-July 2021 found that social workers were more likely to work from home than other care-based professions, such as nurses, midwives, allied care professionals and social care workers. However, working from home has made social work practice more challenging for a variety of reasons.

In August 2021, we asked our members about their feelings about returning to the workplace. One member told us:

"There are real benefits to many of the working practices we have used during the pandemic, but denying office space and confidential areas, expecting people to work out of cars or from home all the time isn't one of them. We need people to be available to react to cases- many can't do this from home. All need access to support when doing a difficult, emotive job, and opportunity to separate work from home life".

As mentioned in response to question one, the nature of social work is that it is a profession based on growing good working relationships between the social worker and the client. The move to remote working put barriers in place to make it harder for this to be achieved. The recent survey by SWU for LBC Radio found that 75% of Scottish social workers felt that digital alternatives to face-to-face contact had not been appropriate for most of the people they work with.

Aside from having an effect on the ability to carry out their role properly, there was also a significant impact on people's work-life balance and wellbeing. In the survey carried out by King's College London, one social worker from Scotland mentioned that working from home: "Negated it being my safe place after a difficult day."

Another explained that: "Being at home in some ways helped the balance as without the commute I still had a little energy for my children after work. On other occasions it has been negative as work has been non-stop for more than 12 hours in a day so there has been no time for family and it can be hard to switch off as clearly as you do when leaving an office."

Another finding was that social workers missed being able to share their thoughts and concerns with colleagues as a way to relieve stress and reduce anxiety. The boundary between work and personal life became non-existent and this made it harder for social workers to 'switch off' from work to focus on family life and their personal time. This skewed work-life balance once again increased the level of risk to social worker's mental and physical health with more likelihood of social isolation which contributes to exhaustion and heightened risk of burnout.

Indeed, 70.9% of respondents from Scotland to BASW's recent survey agreed or strongly agreed that the Covid-19 crisis has made it more difficult for them to switch off from work because they are now working from home more.

It was not all negative though, with some social workers benefiting from greater flexibility from home working and most have highlighted that they felt well supported by their employers to work remotely. Our recent survey of Scottish social workers showed that 74.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their employer had taken reasonable steps to ensure that they were able to work from home where appropriate.

Nevertheless, while there have been some benefits of remote working, it appears to have been outweighed by the negative impact on mental wellbeing, social worker's confidence in managing risk and establishing positive relationships on line and the fact it has made performing the job more stressful compared to pre-pandemic.

#### 5 What (if anything) has made it difficult for you to follow measures and guidance?

Please give us your views:

As highlighted in the response to question four, the nature of the social work role alongside the increased demands and pressures placed on the workforce throughout the course of the pandemic has, ultimately, made it more challenging for social workers to deliver the highest possible quality of service.

In addition, there were further challenges at the earlier stages of the pandemic regarding access to PPE. A survey by the Social Worker's Union at the start of the pandemic revealed that 54% of social workers felt that PPE was inadequate with a third having to provide their own face masks. Risk assessments were also rated as ineffective by 51% of respondents. The recent survey by SWU for LBC Radio revealed that, worryingly, 57.14% of social workers in Scotland felt they had put their own health at risk whilst working during the pandemic.

Many social workers were left with unfair ethical and emotional dilemmas as a result of not having adequate access to PPE and testing. BASW's recent survey of social workers showed that 63.1% of respondents from Scotland agreed or strongly agreed that they had encountered more ethical and moral dilemmas since the beginning of Covid-19 related restrictions in March 2020.

This led to social workers being forced into making difficult and unfair decisions around what support they could realistically provide given the fact that they were not being given appropriate protective equipment.

#### 6 In the last 3 months have you or your household self-isolated because of COVID-19? If yes, what factors made this easier or more difficult?

Not Answered

Please give us your views:

N/A

#### 7 Please tell us about any of your experiences with the following (if they are relevant to you), and how it has impacted on you or your household:

Please give us your views:

Working from home and reduced social contact/interaction has been discussed in response to question four.

#### 8 What kind of help would make you feel generally safer and more supported at the moment?

Please give us your views:

In order to reduce levels of demand on social work services, we need to tackle the underlying societal causes that lead to those increased pressures and increased caseloads. Local authorities need adequate levels of funding and greater levels of investment into services in order to tackle instances of poor mental and physical health, poor social care provision and poverty.

As one respondent to SWU's recent survey explained:

"The system in Scotland works well. The problem is the cuts to the benefits system, cuts to mental health services, cuts to the welfare state etc which plunges more people and more families into poverty and affects the ability of people to move out of extreme poverty."

With regards to the profession more directly, access to mental health support for social workers must be significantly increased and widened. This means provision of counselling services and training for employers to give them the tools to recognise instances of poor mental health within the workforce and how to respond appropriately. "Better systems for supporting new staff" was also highlighted in SWU's recent survey as an area that could be particularly improved upon to improve retention of staff.

A flexible working model that strikes the right balance of minimising the health risk to staff and service users of covid-19 and allows for relationship-based social work practice to flourish and thrive. Effective risk assessment and swift and efficient provision of professional equipment and guidance is critical for social workers to be well equipped to perform their roles safely.

This flexible approach must include a balance of online and offline support. There has been real concern amongst social workers about the impact of 'digital poverty' throughout the pandemic, which often disproportionately affects the already most vulnerable people who may need social services. The Social Worker's Union survey in 2020 found that 49% of social workers were worried that their most vulnerable clients were not being reached through digital interventions. So steps must be taken to support those who struggle to access technology, don't have the necessary skillset or can't pay for data. Locations where physically distanced support can be more easily delivered should be maximised as should partnerships with relevant charities to allow individuals access to IT.

For those who can access and use technology and do not feel they are losing out on support by engaging with a social worker this way, specific guidance for engaging with service users through online platforms and over the phone should be developed. Digital innovation should be encouraged where it is appropriate for both the social worker and person using services.

Finally, more attention must be given to the value and importance of the work of social workers and the positive role they have in our communities. 35.71% of respondents from Scotland to SWU's recent survey felt they are not valued at all as social workers, which is extremely worrying. Greater recognition of the efforts of social workers, particularly throughout the pandemic, would help to boost morale at a time when the workforce is exhausted and stretched. This would not only increase retention but also raise the profile of the profession and help to attract more people to become social workers.

## About you

The Scottish Government would like your permission to publish your consultation response. Please indicate your publishing preference:

Publish response only (without name)

Please tell us your name if you would like to (your name will only be shared publicly if you selected 'Publish response with name' in the above question)

Please provide a response here :  
Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW)

What is your email address?

Please provide response here :  
jonny.adamson@basw.co.uk

What is your phone number (if you do not have an email address)

Please complete if relevant :  
07552 988 931

To which gender identity do you most identify?

Not Answered

How old are you?

Not Answered

Do you have any long-standing physical or mental impairments, illness or disability, expected to last 12 months or more?

Not Answered

If you answered yes to the above question, does your condition limit your day-to-day activities in any way?

Not Answered

What is your ethnic group? (Please tick the box which best describes your ethnic group or background)

Not Answered

Would you consider yourself to be a carer (someone who supports someone else)? For example, an unpaid person who looks after a family member, partner or friend because of their illness, frailty, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction who cannot cope without support)

Not Answered

Which of the following best describes your current situation?

Not Answered

How well would you say you are managing financially these days?

Not Answered

We will share your response internally with other Scottish Government policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Government or other research agencies acting on behalf of, or in collaboration with, the Scottish Government, to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

Yes

I confirm that I have read the privacy policy and consent to the data I provide being used as set out in the policy.

I consent

## Evaluation

Please help us improve our consultations by answering the questions below. (Responses to the evaluation will not be published.)

Matrix 1 - How satisfied were you with this consultation?:

Very satisfied

Please enter comments here.:

Matrix 1 - How would you rate your satisfaction with using this platform (Citizen Space) to respond to this consultation?:

Very satisfied

Please enter comments here.: