

Child and family social work in the context of COVID-19: current practice issues and innovations

Research Summary

On the 23rd of March 2020, the government announced a period of lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This marked the beginning of rapid change for Children's Services. Following the introduction of social distancing measures, social workers needed to move quickly to reconfigure the support provided to children, young people, families and carers. **This briefing paper outlines the findings from a research study investigating how social workers have responded to the challenges of social distancing in their work with families.** It identifies the possibilities, risks and future implications of 'virtual' social work practice.

Key messages

- When prioritising 'high risk' cases during times of increased demand, local authorities must remain alert to the risk of increasing unnecessary coercive interventions with children and families
- Children and families must be consulted about the recent changes to social work practice
- Virtual working affords unexpected benefits for social work with children and families, particularly for engaging with young people
- Virtual engagement has limitations, particularly for child protection and assessment work
- Virtual home visits create additional risks for professional judgement – particularly around identifying hidden risks
- Professionals must proactively address barriers to digital inclusion to ensure families have a voice within virtual meetings and reviews
- Remote working has significant impacts on child and family social workers – these must be addressed to ensure worker wellbeing and retention

Research findings

These findings are based on in-depth, qualitative telephone interviews with 31 child and family social workers across 9 local authorities (LAs) in England, undertaken as part of an ongoing research project. The findings reported here are based on data collected between the 19th March, 2020 and 13th June, 2020, covering the period immediately before and after the announcement of lockdown. It captures social workers' perspectives on their work as the pandemic unfolded. There were four key areas of change:

1. The immediate impact of lockdown on social work practice
2. Virtual engagement with children and families
3. Family participation in meetings and reviews
4. Social worker wellbeing and team support

Each of these changes presented unexpected possibilities as well as challenges and risks.

Authors This research was carried out by Dr Laura L. Cook (Lecturer in Social Work) and Dr Danny Zschomler (Research Associate) at the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF) University of East Anglia.

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1. The immediate impact of lockdown on social work practice

In response to social distancing measures, local authorities needed to move quickly to reconfigure the support provided to children and families.

- Almost all social workers reported undertaking rapid 'RAG' (Red Amber Green) risk-ratings of all existing cases
- Visits to children and families RAG rated as 'red' (high risk) were prioritised for essential face-to-face visits, and/or frequent virtual visits. Typically these visits were recorded and audited by LAs to ensure they were completed
- Families/children at 'amber' (medium) or 'green' (low) risk were visited less frequently, and these contacts were typically virtual, conducted via platforms such as WhatsApp, FaceTime or Skype
- For essential face-to-face visits, infection risks for both social worker and family were weighed against the necessity of the visit. These decisions were made within social work teams on a case-by-case basis
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was required for essential visits. In contrast to the findings of the BASW (2020) survey, the majority of social workers in this research said that their LAs had moved quickly to ensure their safety and provided PPE where it was needed
- Social workers in intake and assessment teams described a dramatic drop in referrals to Children's Services. They attributed this to children not attending school and their needs and risks being less visible. Despite an overall decrease, social workers described an increase in referrals from neighbours around domestic abuse and mental health issues among children and young people
- Almost all social workers expected a surge of referrals and increased demand on services once children return to school

Social workers expressed concerns about the unintended consequences of prioritising high-risk cases. They identified that:

- Families' interactions with services could become more coercive and concerned with 'risk monitoring' rather than meaningful support
- Some families were being contacted 'too frequently', and this could be oppressive and intrusive
- The prioritisation of high risk cases could lead to a long-term increase in thresholds for support, or could act as justification for a 'cost cutting agenda'
- In the medium to long-term, families assessed at 'lower risk' could become invisible

1.2 Recommendations

- Local authorities (LAs) need to be alert to the risks of inadvertently increasing coercive family involvement with Children's Services. At the time of this research, systems were rapidly being developed to audit contacts with high priority 'high risk' cases. This may compel social workers to prioritise carrying out and recording less meaningful contacts with families. It is essential that risk assessments made in the weeks following lockdown are regularly re-visited and reviewed
- LAs may need to anticipate additional capacity for intake and assessment services in the months following children's return to school. This is an area of social work with a high reliance on agency staff. These agency staff may have been redeployed elsewhere due to the initial drop in referrals. LAs will need to ensure sufficient capacity to meet demand over the coming months

2. Virtual engagement with children and families

Following lockdown, the way that social workers engaged with children and families changed overnight. All but the most urgent home visits were replaced by virtual interactions.

- FaceTime and WhatsApp were the most commonly identified platforms for engaging with families. Social workers also described using Skype and Google Hangouts. Microsoft Teams and Zoom were primarily used for meetings and reviews (see section 3)
- A combination of video calls and text/instant messaging were used to keep in touch with parents and carers
- Emails were regarded as a 'slower' and more impersonal mode of communication, and were generally only used to share paperwork

- WhatsApp video and instant messaging services were typically used to keep in touch with older children and adolescents
- Virtual working encouraged 'little and often' contact with families as opposed to less frequent, longer interactions

Virtual engagement with children was challenging, particularly for younger children. Social workers needed to find creative ways to bridge the physical and psychological distance between them and the child/young person during video calls (see fig. 1) Capturing and holding the child's interest was key. For instance, one social worker described how finding a 'Minecraft' backdrop to use in her video call led to a breakthrough moment in her work with a young person.

Many social workers initially viewed virtual working as a direct challenge to the core principles of social work. However, as lockdown continued, many expressed great surprise at the unexpected possibilities afforded by virtual practice.

2.1 The benefits of virtual engagements with families

- The 'little and often' approach encouraged by virtual working was welcomed by some families. Many social workers described developing closer relationships with families and becoming more familiar with their everyday lives during lockdown
- Social workers could be more responsive to families where needed. A quick video call in response to a text was more convenient than scheduling a visit and travelling to the family home
- Virtual communication was greatly preferred by some service users, particularly by looked after young people/adolescents who felt more comfortable with messaging and video calls than face-to-face contact
- Indirect forms of communication without video (such as text/instant messaging) could be a non-threatening way into topics that were difficult to talk about in person. This led to families sharing their views with social workers more openly. This was surprising to many workers, who initially regarded text messages as a less appropriate form of contact with families
- Prior to lockdown, many workers spent much of their day travelling to home visits. With this removed, some workers expressed feeling more energised and focused in their interactions with families. They could also offer support to a greater number of service users across the working day

Fig. 1. Methods used by social workers during virtual visits with children

- Instigating basic games over video call e.g. noughts and crosses
- Asking children to use their mobile phones to take them on a tour of the house
- Engaging children in imaginative play games. 'Imagine you are in a spaceship, can you show me round?'
- Sending hardcopies of worksheets, genogram templates and other resources in the post to be completed with the social worker during a later video call
- Using backgrounds and emojis available on video call services to initiate interaction with the child
- Using their own children's toys, such as dolls and tea sets, to engage play 'through the screen'
- Singing nursery rhymes with young children
- Using a 'show and tell' approach to initiate interaction - inviting children to bring toys/objects to show the worker
- Starting a video call with the parent or carer who could help/encourage the child to participate. The child could then take over when they felt comfortable

2.2. Risks of virtual engagement with families

- Digital exclusion was a significant barrier to work with children and families. Not all families had the internet at home or could afford the data costs associated with video calls
- Virtual engagement was far less effective where social workers did not have a prior relationship with the child, parent or carer
- Virtual home visits had significant limitations for initial assessments and high risk cases where there were child welfare concerns
- Visiting a family virtually could make it more difficult to assess the home environment and to pick up on important cues and sensory information

- Social workers noted that it was increasingly difficult to detect 'hidden risks' during virtual home visits. Many felt that their judgments about child safety were 'less robust' as a result. As a consequence, social workers were worried about keeping children safe during lockdown
- Workers were concerned that they would be blamed for difficult decisions they had made in these circumstances
- It was difficult to ensure both confidentiality and safety during virtual visits. Social workers had no way of knowing who might be listening to the call. This was a particular issue when talking to children at risk of abuse/neglect and parents experiencing domestic abuse
- Virtual communication could be inappropriate for sensitive topics – particularly in the context of new relationships. Social workers specifically noted that they could not convey empathy and reassurance as effectively as they could in-person
- Technology failures such as poor signal quality and calls 'dropping out' could be disruptive and upsetting for families, as well as frustrating for social workers

2.3 Recommendations for virtual work with children and families

- There is an urgent need for research into children and families' perspectives on virtual social work and their perspectives on how this can work more effectively
- Virtual home visiting can work well in some circumstances, but cannot adequately replace face-to-face home visits. Social workers still need to conduct home visits in urgent cases, in relation to child protection and to initiate new relationships. Local authorities therefore need to continue to provide PPE to minimise the risk for social workers and families as much as possible
- For some young people, virtual contact may actually be the preferred form of contact with their social worker rather than an option borne of necessity
- Social workers should consider text messaging *alongside* other modes of communication in their work with families as it can provide a helpful way in to sensitive topics
- Social workers need to check where the child or parent is, who is with them, and whether it is safe to talk, remaining mindful of the risks to the child/parent of being overheard
- Emojis, basic games, and engaging backgrounds can aid virtual engagement with children – designing age and social work appropriate add-ins to existing platforms is an important area for innovation
- Pre-posted physical resource packs may act as a link between the child and their social worker. Consideration should be given to the design of engaging, interesting posted materials for children

3. Family participation in meetings and reviews

Despite the relaxations to the requirements for reviews in the DfE Coronavirus (2020) guidance, social workers continued to hold looked after children reviews, fostering and adoption panels and child protection conferences. These were conducted virtually, which had implications for children, young people, parents and carers' participation in decisions about their care. The majority of social workers described using Microsoft Teams for meetings and reviews and a minority described using Zoom, WhatsApp and FaceTime.

3.1 Benefits of virtual meetings for family participation in meetings and reviews

- Social workers reported that families who were participating from their home often felt more relaxed and confident than in a formal conference or meeting room
- Not having to sit in a room with a large group of professionals could allow parents to feel more confident in contributing
- Virtual meetings could offer greater autonomy for some family members. Parents and carers were often on different devices, and young people might be in another room on a separate device
- Social workers reported a dramatic change in young peoples' participation in meetings and reviews. After meetings went virtual, social workers reported participation from young people (which included parents and looked after children) who had never previously felt comfortable to share their views, often despite years of contact with professionals

- WhatsApp or FaceTime could act as a more comfortable, less ‘professionalised’ space where young people could share their views
- Young people often became the ‘tech experts’, helping foster carers, parents and professionals to manage the technology during meetings. This altered the power dynamic within meetings, helping to build their confidence and increase their involvement
- Virtual meetings offered additional opportunities for staged participation. For instance, young children and less confident young people could ‘listen in’ to the meeting via a parent or carer’s device and join later if/when they felt comfortable

3.2. Risks of virtual meetings for family participation in meetings and reviews

- Socioeconomic status and living in an area of deprivation are risk factors for digital exclusion. Digital exclusion affected some families’ ability to participate in meetings and reviews– some did not have a reliable internet connection, could not afford the costs associated with video calls or struggled to use the technology required
- For families requiring the support of a translator, this added an additional layer of complexity to virtual meetings, especially where translation services did not offer conference calling or video calls
- After the first month of lockdown, an etiquette was starting to develop around Microsoft Teams and this became ‘business as usual’ for professionals. However, most families were not familiar with Microsoft Teams, preferring FaceTime, WhatsApp or Zoom. This placed them at a disadvantage
- There were security concerns around Zoom and other platforms in common use. Some social workers expressed confusion about which platforms could be safely used for confidential meetings
- Where parents or children became distressed during meetings, social workers reported difficulties in catching the ‘build up’ – it was difficult to see when people were upset – especially if bandwidth limitations meant that video had to be switched off to speed up the connection
- When family members left the call it was difficult to know whether they were upset, or whether the internet connection had been lost

3.4. Recommendations

- When inviting families to participate in reviews and meetings, professionals need to consider the four barriers to digital inclusion (access, skills, confidence and motivation) and how these might be overcome on a case-by-case basis
- Local authorities need to consider replacing travel grants for families to attend meetings with grants for WiFi/additional data
- Social workers should undertake pre-meeting check-ins with families to ensure they are able to participate, to offer reassurance about what will happen and to address any worries or concerns
- Professionals chairing meetings need to regularly check-in with families during meetings
- Chairs may need to consider alternatives to Microsoft Teams where this is a barrier to family participation
- Local authorities need to provide clear guidance on secure platforms for sharing information and those which present security risks
- Professionals should encourage staged participation during meetings, not pressuring but also keeping open, opportunities for family participation throughout the video call
- There is an urgent need for consult children, young people, parents and carers about their perspectives on virtual meetings

4. Social worker wellbeing and team support

Aside from infrequent urgent home visits, social workers reported working exclusively from home during lockdown. The informal support provided within social work teams has been identified as key to social worker resilience and wellbeing. Social workers therefore needed to navigate a new way of staying in touch with colleagues.

4.1. Working from home – what worked well?

- Some local authorities made a small grant available to enable social workers to purchase equipment for working at home (e.g. standing desks, chairs and headsets). This assisted with remote working and helped workers to feel valued and positive about the new working conditions

- Social workers who already worked at home for part of the week tended to feel more confident about the changes
- Social workers valued opportunities to 'check in' with colleagues outside of more formal virtual team meetings. For instance, one team set up a 'virtual water cooler meeting' where social workers could simply dial-in, work together or talk with no fixed agenda
- Social workers valued text-based ways of keeping in touch outside of video calls – this included creating team WhatsApp groups. Social workers could feel more confident to share their worries and frustrations in these 'informal' spaces, which could help them to feel supported
- Most social workers described feeling 'very well supported' or 'more supported' than usual as a result of keeping in touch with colleagues virtually. Some social workers reported that relationships within their team were closer and stronger as a result of the new working conditions
- Social workers valued managers who offered them the flexibility to log-on after hours where they had caring responsibilities during the day

4.2. Working from home – what were the challenges?

- Social workers with caring responsibilities (including childcare and home schooling) had to juggle these alongside often emotive and challenging work with families
- A minority of social workers described these demands as unmanageable. Some had considered whether they wanted to stay in the profession as a result
- Having a workspace at home, and contact with colleagues via WhatsApp after hours could erode the boundaries between work and home life. For some workers, this meant that home no longer provided respite from work
- Loss of travel time could reduce social workers' opportunities to reflect and pause between tasks. This could result in an extremely intensive working day of back-to-back virtual visits and meetings
- Loss of face-to-face interaction could make it difficult for social workers to recognise when a team member was struggling and needed support
- Informal peer discussions would have naturally taken place in the office. Now a conscious choice was required to phone a colleague – over time this could lead to a sense of isolation
- Loss of vicarious and opportunistic learning opportunities for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) was identified as a significant problem. Social workers expressed concerns that the opportunities provided by working in the office and observing colleagues during visits was simply not replicable when working remotely
- Informal ways of keeping in touch could emphasise difficult dynamics within the team and could silence marginalised team members. Some workers spoke of 'in groups' and 'out groups' reflected in the teams' WhatsApp interactions
- Staying connected was more of a challenge for newer, less established teams and those with a higher number of temporary staff

4.3. Recommendations

- Social workers described various helpful strategies for 'switching off' from work. This included muting work discussions on instant messaging services after a certain time, closing their laptop and putting it away as a psychological way of 'clocking off'. Identifying strategies that allowed them to draw a psychological boundary around work enabled workers to manage working from home
- Team managers can play a vital role in scaffolding how workers stay in touch. This may include being alert difficult dynamics and getting in touch with workers who are less vocal online. This is particularly important for new team and for workers who are new to the team
- There is an urgent need to consider how to support NQSWs within virtual child and family social work. This may include virtual shadowing opportunities, such as joining colleagues for virtual home visits or 'buddying' with more experienced workers
- Supervisors should help social workers to consider the 'blind spots' in assessment that may emerge as a result of virtual home visiting

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