

Closing submission on behalf of the British Association of Social Workers

1. These are the closing submissions on behalf of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (the Inquiry) which has looked at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Children and Young People, including social work practice, across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. BASW extends its thanks to the Inquiry for the opportunity to participate in and contribute to this module as a Core Participant. In particular, the Inquiry's attention is drawn to the written statement filed on behalf of BASW (INQ000650824) and the subsequent oral evidence of Professor Samantha Baron, the interim Chief Executive of BASW.
2. As the Inquiry will be aware, BASW is the professional association for social work and social workers across the UK. At the time of the pandemic, BASW had up to 22000 members across the UK. Membership of the professional association is not a requirement for practice, unlike for some other professions. BASW provides information, specialist training and advice and representation to members as well as lobbying on behalf of the profession. All these activities continued, and indeed increased in intensity, to provide support to a workforce under considerable pressure as social workers sought to practise, fulfil their statutory responsibilities and duties and deliver more wide-ranging support to those with whom they worked during the pandemic.
3. BASW offers its heartfelt condolences to all those who lost loved ones during the pandemic. BASW pays tribute to social workers, and all those professionals and informal carers, who continued to educate and support children and young people during the pandemic, placing themselves at risk on a daily basis, especially to those who lost their lives or who suffer ongoing impacts on their health as a consequence.
4. BASW's closing statement will address the following topics:
 - a. The implications of pandemic restrictions on social work practice in children's services;

- b. The importance of profession-specific guidance;
- c. The protection of human rights and statutory entitlements;
- d. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Infection Prevention Control (IPC); and
- e. BASW's recommendations.

The implications of pandemic restrictions on social work practice

5. 'Social worker' is a protected title. Anyone calling themselves a social worker must be qualified and registered with one of the four national social work regulators. Over time, social workers have acquired significant responsibilities in law, including in the delivery of children's social services, across the four parts of the UK. Successive pieces of legislation have created a unique role for social workers to protect and support children and families under this legally protected title and they hold a number of statutory duties in this regard. However, it is submitted that this role appears to have been repeatedly overlooked and misunderstood during the pandemic.
6. The practice of social work means social workers routinely visit children and families in their homes or other accommodation and may do so regularly over a period of time. This differs from many other professions. Many aspects of social work require a physical inspection of the setting and unrestricted access to the child or children being visited. It is challenging therefore to effectively carry out social work using remote technology.
7. The ability to fulfil a number of social work responsibilities, including statutory duties, were severely curtailed by lockdown restrictions. These restrictions reduced social workers' ability to protect and support children and young people. For example, the restrictions on professional visiting, lack of access to PPE and lack of government guidance on fulfilling statutory duties limited their ability to assess and intervene in risks of harm or neglect at home or in residential facilities.
8. Social workers were sometimes refused access to domestic homes amid difficulties created by the lockdown restrictions and the fear that the spread of the disease and the duty to comply with the rules generated. This increased concern about the ability to safeguard and protect. Home visits form an essential part of social work with children and families, and social workers were concerned about the issues that would be missed if they were unable to access the home and see a child or children in their home environment.

9. There was no adequate guidance and understanding of how social workers in children's services work predominantly in family homes. Where visits were judged to be necessary, if PPE was unavailable, social distancing of two metres was often impractical in small homes, especially with very young children. 'Doorstep' or 'window' visits did not provide the social worker with a full picture of what was happening in the home. Social workers were also having to balance the guidance issued against legislation setting out their duties and responsibilities. Guidance published by the Department for Education for England on 3 April 2020 suggested local authority statutory duties could be dispensed with when in fact there had been no changes to legislation to allow this to happen, further confusing an already challenging situation. Whilst this guidance suggested otherwise, without the required legislative amendments, local authorities had to continue to fulfil their statutory duties.
10. Social workers were seeking to follow guidance within the existing framework of statutory responsibilities. In future, greater clarity is required as to whether guidance issued in response to imminent danger, such as a pandemic, takes precedence over legislation in high-risk situations such as child protection. Whilst social workers will employ their professional judgement, unnecessary and harmful ethical dilemmas are created in the absence of direction on how to balance emergency guidance and statutory legislation.
11. The importance of relationships and social contact to physical, mental and emotional wellbeing is well documented and is recognised by social work. Social work itself is a relational practice, and it works by building up trust and confidence over time. Restrictions caused disruption, confusion and in some cases distress. They undermined both continuity in the support offered by social services and the ability of social workers to maintain relationships.
12. Social workers continued to deliver services, but their practice was affected significantly, and risks were not well managed, especially early on. Whilst an urgent response was necessary, little attention appeared to have been paid to how social workers would and could continue to discharge their legislative responsibilities safely, effectively and in a manner that would allow the interests of service users to be met. As explored in the oral evidence of Professor Samantha Baron, the Safeguarding Practice Review conducted following the tragic death of Finley Boden, contains insights into the challenges being experienced by social workers, and other professionals, during this period. These include difficulties in conducting face-to-face work, including being refused access due to unverified claims of Covid-19 cases in a home, the risks of only seeing 'curated'

information presented and the associated reliance on self-reporting, and the impact of illness on an already stretched workforce [13/86/11 – 13/99/2].

The importance of profession-specific guidance

13. From the outset, BASW raised concerns regarding gaps in pandemic preparedness in general, but particularly the lack of understanding of the role and requirements of social workers in such an emergency, as well as the contribution they can make to the health and wellbeing of many members of the community if supported appropriately. Social workers' ability to undertake their duties was undermined by a lack of role-specific guidance which recognised the particular nature of their work.
14. Much of the guidance that was produced fell short in terms of recognising the unique functions of social workers who were often forced to refer to multiple pieces of guidance. This included a lack of clarity on what constituted essential and non-essential work. BASW conducted widespread surveys of its membership during the pandemic and social workers were raising concerns that the guidance available to them at the early stage of the pandemic was insufficient and meant that they did not feel confident that they were undertaking their practice in the right way (RA/01, INQ000509533).
15. BASW produced its own suite of professional practice guidance in an attempt to fill the gaps left by governments and workforce regulators. However, this was inherently insufficient as BASW is a membership organisation and, unlike the workforce regulators, it cannot reach all of the social work profession. Additionally, while the guidance offered much needed assistance to the social workers it reached, it did not have any official standing.

The protection of human rights and statutory entitlements

16. It is submitted on behalf of BASW that consultation with the profession on government decisions, including those that would change statutory frameworks, was limited. Whilst BASW appreciates that decisions needed to be taken at speed, the lack of consultation meant important considerations were overlooked. This risked undermining the rights and entitlements of those in need of care and support.
17. Whilst an urgent response was undoubtedly necessary, the introduction of, for example, the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 in England

appears to have paid little attention to a) the potential detrimental impact of the proposed relaxations on the children and young people affected and b) how social workers could continue to discharge their legislative responsibilities safely, effectively and in a manner that would allow the needs of children and young people to be met. The lack of consultation with those tasked with delivering care and support was problematic.

18. A further concern related to the lack of guidance on the duty to apply the European Convention on Human Rights. Social workers were already practising in circumstances where they were facing choices and decisions beyond the usual bounds of ethics and practice. Balancing risks and balancing the human rights of children and those around them in an ethical way is essential to social work with children and families. A key concern for social workers during this period was that they felt caught between fulfilling their legal duties, taking the ethical actions they wanted to take and keeping themselves and those around them as safe as possible. Guidance that recognised the particular nature of the ethical challenges they faced, in balancing the risks and rights of the children and families they worked with and the rights of others around them in the context of pandemic restrictions, was needed, including guidance on the use of PPE, infection prevention and control, access to testing and risk management decisions on home visits. However, this was either not produced or not tailored to social work's specific needs. .

PPE and IPC

19. Social workers routinely visit a series of people's homes. This has important implications for the use of PPE and for the spread of infection.
20. The lack of access to PPE and the lack of guidance on using PPE and IPC was a significant issue identified in BASW's work during the first year of the pandemic. Indeed, access to PPE was the primary concern shared with BASW by social workers in the early months, both out of concern for their own welfare and that of those with whom they worked. PPE is not something most social workers would have been familiar with pre-pandemic. The availability and appropriateness of PPE as well as the guidance on PPE and IPC varied widely across the UK. Lack of PPE also served to undermine the confidence of social workers in carrying out their roles.

21. Access to testing also remained problematic until at least March 2021 for social workers as professionals.

BASW's recommendations

22. The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities and exposed the fragility of the system and a sector in which funding had fallen in real terms over the previous decade. Under-funding and under-resourcing over more than a decade had left children's services in a weakened position entering the pandemic. Many preventive services had been reduced or cut altogether, and an already depleted workforce was then further reduced by infection, self-isolation or shielding.

23. Preparation for any future pandemic needs to recognise broader wellbeing outcomes and the protection and promotion of human rights, not just clinical health outcomes. Better preparation is required, for example, to ensure that the loss of support services is avoided to the greatest possible extent and to ensure appropriate provision of education to children and young people. The pivoting of support services also needs to take account of the reality of digital poverty and other forms of digital exclusion.

24. The UK and devolved governments need to recognise the unique nature of the statutory responsibilities of the social work profession, duties that successive governments have bestowed upon the profession through legislation. In any future pandemic, specific guidance is required that reflects this distinctive role and the regular movement of social workers across a range of settings. BASW would willingly contribute expertise and experience to any forum drawing up profession-specific guidance. However, in order to ensure it reaches all members of the profession, such guidance needs to be centrally coordinated by a statutory body and disseminated through the workforce regulators. The latter, through the requirement for registration, are the only bodies to hold contact details for all practising social workers.

25. Social work representation is needed in national and local level resilience planning forums, to contribute their expertise in protecting human rights, understanding of legislative entitlements, child protection and experience of working in disasters and emergencies, by adopting an approach similar to local authority emergency planning where social services are a core member.

26. Blanket restrictions should be avoided wherever possible, with a more balanced approach to wellbeing outcomes adopted. Social workers, as key workers with statutory responsibilities, should be exempt from blanket visiting restrictions when their professional judgement deems an in-person visit is required.
27. BASW recognises that some groups were disproportionately affected during the pandemic. Existing inequalities were further aggravated. In any future emergency of this magnitude, prompt action must be taken to address disproportionate impact on specific groups, such as those from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, or those with learning disabilities, as soon as such evidence emerges. Social work itself is an ethnically diverse profession and the workforce was also disproportionately impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Social workers are a very diverse group and thus face a multitude of different personal and professional challenges. This needs to be taken into account in workforce planning and risk assessment.
28. Ongoing challenges of recruitment and retention in the profession need to be addressed decisively. Small practical steps would include, for example, increasing and widening the availability of student bursaries and increasing social worker salaries in line with other professional occupations. Employers and organisations contracting social workers should also consider the need for effective reflective supervision, the importance of peer support and the provision of genuine wellbeing support. Longer term, the profession needs to be moved to a more stable footing with national pay scales and nationally agreed conditions of service, including a defined career development framework, none of which currently exist.
29. Social worker morale was undermined by a perceived lack of recognition, appreciation and understanding of their role and the work that they were doing, in addition to the perception that social services were viewed as being of secondary importance to healthcare. A greater understanding of the social work role by decision makers would allow the resource provided by social workers to be used more effectively in any future pandemic situation.

Final remarks

30. BASW has been grateful for the opportunity to contribute to Module 8 of the Inquiry and awaits the Inquiry's recommendations with great interest. Social work plays an important role in the protection and support of children and young people deemed vulnerable and

we have appreciated the opportunity granted by the Chair to share the concerns and represent the interests of the profession. Whilst some of these concerns and interests are shared widely across the sector, BASW has sought to draw the Inquiry's attention to others which relate to the specific statutory responsibilities that have accrued to the profession over time. The challenges that were faced by social workers could have been avoided or mitigated with either better preparation or with more prompt recognition of social worker concerns. This is particularly the case with regard to the discharge of statutory duties. It is BASW's view that our children and young people, and those who seek to assist and protect them, deserve better support and greater consideration in any future pandemic.

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