Coronavirus briefing: guidance for social workers

This briefing summarises the latest guidance for social workers and social work practitioners during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

29 April 2020

Introduction

Social work practitioners have an important role to play in keeping children safe, particularly during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We have pulled together key guidance from all four UK nations to answer some frequently asked questions.

At the time of writing there was not published guidance for social work in every UK nation. Professionals working in areas where there is no published guidance may wish to follow the guidance from other nations as examples of best practice.

This briefing will be kept up-to-date with any new guidance that is published.

Social work workforce

Should practitioners be working during the pandemic?

Social work practitioners are critical to the coronavirus (COVID-19) response and should continue working throughout the pandemic.

Across the UK health and social care workers are classified as key workers, meaning that their children can continue to go to school if necessary (Cabinet Office and

**How is the government making sure there are enough social workers to support children and families during the pandemic?**

**Across the UK**, the Coronavirus Act 2020 has given emergency powers to social work regulators to allow them to temporarily register certain people to return to or enter social work practice.

In **England**, social workers who have left the Social Work England register since 18 March 2018 and those who voluntarily leave during the pandemic can re-register to return to practice for the length of the emergency if they wish (Social Work England, 2020). Social workers who are returning to practice for coronavirus purposes are eligible for free, fast-tracked Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks (DBS, 2020; DfE, 2020a).

In **Northern Ireland**, social workers who have retired or left the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) register in the last three years can return to the workforce as social workers. Final year social work students will qualify on 4 May 2020 and immediately be able to enter the workforce (NI Direct, 2020). Employers can request free emergency barred list checks for individuals entering the health and social care workforce (Department of Health, 2020).

In **Scotland**, social workers who left the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) register in the last five years can apply for registration and re-enter the workforce. Final year social work students who have completed 75% of their practice placements and reached the required academic standard can also apply for registration (Scottish Social Services Council, 2020).

Disclosure Scotland is prioritising checks for social workers and fees for urgent disclosures have been suspended (Disclosure Scotland, 2020).

In **Wales**, those who have left the Social Care Wales register in the last three years can be temporarily registered and return to practise as social workers (Social Care Wales, 2020). They are eligible for free, fast tracked Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks (DBS, 2020).

**Should social work supervision take place during the pandemic?**

In **England**, local authorities are expected to put arrangements in place to ensure sufficient management oversight of practice on a day-to-day basis. Where authorities need to deviate from standard practice and statutory requirements they are expected to keep clear records to capture the rationale and risk assessment for their decision (DfE, 2020a).
In **Northern Ireland**, access to professional supervision is essential for all social workers during the COVID-19 emergency. The Department of Health has published a draft social work supervision policy, which social work employers can use to inform alternative arrangements for supervision (Department of Health, 2020e).

In **Scotland**, the support and supervision of social work practitioners is considered to be particularly important during the coronavirus pandemic. Whilst management support and direction may need to include new and innovative approaches, agencies should continue to take measures to ensure:

- there is accountability for staff practice
- practice in individual casework continues to be monitored and reflected on
- the wellbeing of staff is a constant feature of local management processes

(Scottish Government, 2020d).

**Child protection system**

**How does the Coronavirus Act 2020 affect local authorities’ responsibilities?**

Across the UK, children’s welfare remains paramount. The Coronavirus Act 2020 allows for an easing of some local authority duties so that resources can be focused on protecting the most vulnerable. The changes to duties under the Act should only be exercised where it is necessary in order to provide the highest level of services.

In **England**, there are four easements under the Coronavirus Act.

- Local authorities will not have to carry out detailed assessments of people’s care and support needs in compliance with pre-amendment Care Act requirements. This includes undertaking assessments of children transitioning to adult social care.
- Local authorities will not have to carry out financial assessments in compliance with pre-amendment Care Act requirements.
- Local authorities will not have to prepare or review care and support plans in line with pre-amendment Care Act requirements.
- The duties on local authorities to meet eligible care and support needs under the Care Act are replaced with a power to meet needs.

(Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), 2020).

In **Scotland**, the Coronavirus Act allows for a temporary relaxation of local authorities’ duties in relation to:
• needs assessment for any relevant person under section 12A of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968
• assessments for children under sections 23 and 29 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995
• service user involvement under section 1 of the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013
• preparation of adult carer support plans/young carer statements under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016.

(Scottish Government, 2020a).

In Wales, local authorities do not have to comply with the following duties under the Social Services and Well-being Act 2014:

• the duty to assess the needs of an adult for care and support
• the duty to assess the needs of an adult carer for support
• the duty to carry out a financial assessment
• the duty to meet the care and support needs of an adult, unless it is necessary to protect the adult from abuse or neglect.

In Northern Ireland, there is no guidance around changes to local authorities’ duties under the Coronavirus Act 2020.

How will the child protection system work during the pandemic?

In England, multi-agency conferences should go ahead as far as possible, making use of technology where appropriate. Timely information sharing is particularly important in the current circumstances and professionals should continue to share information to keep children safe from harm. Local authorities are encouraged to work creatively to ensure they are able to make decisions in the best interests of the child (DfE, 2020a).

In Scotland, local protocols for information sharing should not change because of the pandemic. Inter-agency referral discussions (IRDs) should continue to be the formal starting point following a reported child protection concern. Child protection planning meetings should still go ahead. Technology should be used to minimise face-to-face contact and children, parents and carers should have a choice about how or whether they participate. Decision-making about child protection should continue to be informed by relevant stakeholders, including the child and family (Scottish Government, 2020e).

In Wales, local authorities should make every effort to fully comply with the statutory safeguarding legislation and guidance during the pandemic and continue to fully take into account the needs and wishes of children in their care. However, the government recognises that it will be difficult for local authorities to comply with all requirements within the statutory timescales (Welsh Government, 2020d).
Local authorities must continue to develop care and support plans/pathway plans, involving other agencies and children and families as far as is reasonably practicable (Welsh Government, 2020d).

Child protection conferences, core group meetings and review meetings should be maintained using methods such as remote meeting technology (Welsh Government, 2020d).

Safeguarding decisions will need to be led by children’s social services working on the latest information available to them. Although the capacity to review and update care, support and protection plans in the usual way may be impeded during the outbreak, children’s social services should maintain a clear record of the decisions taken, any changes in level of risk and the response (Welsh Government, 2020d).

**Do case reviews still need to be carried out?**

In **England**, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel must be notified when there is a serious incident involving children and young people (DfE, 2020a). Rapid child safeguarding reviews should still be carried out but local safeguarding partnerships should make decisions about how quickly they can be completed. Reviews where coronavirus is a strongly related factor should be expedited. More in-depth child safeguarding practice reviews may not be possible in the current circumstances. Safeguarding partners and local authorities should notify the Department for Education of any decisions about initiating and/or publishing a child safeguarding practice review (DfE, 2020a).

**How should support be prioritised?**

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is still of paramount importance (DfE, 2020a).

In **England**, local authorities are expected to prioritise the most vulnerable children, including undertaking necessary visits whilst taking appropriate infection control measures (DfE, 2020b).

In **Northern Ireland**, professionals need to decide what to prioritise based on the expert advice available. Social workers must balance individuals’ rights and best interests with the duty to protect them from harming themselves or others. Urgent operational decisions should not be delayed because senior staff are unavailable, particularly where there is an immediate threat to people’s health and safety. (Department of Health, 2020d).

In **Wales**, there is an expectation that children’s services will risk assess new and existing cases and review this on a regular basis. Local authorities should work in partnership across agencies to share information, avoid duplication and secure a
shared understanding of each child’s need. They should make decisions together on how to utilise available resources to best effect. Local authorities are responsible for recording why and how decisions have been reached (Welsh Government, 2020d).

**How can local authorities ensure suitable placements for children who need to go into care?**

In **England**, additional funding is available for local authorities to help secure additional placements for children in care. Local authorities should prioritise developing the local fostering capacity to help meet demand. Local authorities need to ensure that children are given accommodation that meets their needs as much as is possible. Independent and semi-independent provision can be the right choice for some older children if placements in foster homes or children’s homes cannot be found (DfE, 2020a).

In **Northern Ireland**, fostering or home placements should be considered first and children should only be placed in residential care in cases of extreme need (Department of Health, 2020b).

In **Wales**, local authorities need to ensure children are provided with accommodation that best meets their needs given the current context, and do all they can to promote the wellbeing of children in care. Placements in independent and semi-independent provision should continue as they can be the right choice for some young people. If a service is providing care, it must be registered with Care Inspectorate Wales (Welsh Government, 2020d).

**Should residential children’s care stay open?**

In **England**, residential children’s homes should stay open. If staffing shortages put a residential setting at risk of closure this should be discussed as a matter of urgency with the relevant local authorities and Ofsted should be notified (DfE, 2020a).

In **Northern Ireland**, residential children’s care and supported accommodation for young people should stay open. Bank or agency staff can be used as temporary cover to ensure staff ratios are kept at a safe level (Department of Health, 2020a; Department of Health, 2020b).

In **Scotland**, residential child care settings play a critical role during the crisis, ensuring that children and young people are properly cared for and protected. Settings should assess staffing levels on a daily basis and liaise with local authorities, the Care Inspectorate and commissioners if there is a risk of staffing shortages (Scottish Government, 2020b).

In **Wales**, residential children’s homes should remain open. They should work closely with the local authority to plan for potential staff shortages (Welsh Government,
2020c). Children’s residential homes should notify Care Inspectorate Wales if they are going to close (Welsh Government, 2020d).

**How should residential settings implement social distancing measures?**

In **England**, the Department for Education has published guidance on social distancing and isolating for residential settings (DfE and PHE, 2020).

In **Scotland**, the government has published guidance for residential child care, including implementing social distancing and self-isolation measures (Scottish Government, 2020b).

**Are family courts still operating?**

In **England** and **Wales**, family courts are still operating and are moving towards remote hearings (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020).

**Direct work with children and families**

**Can practitioners still visit children?**

In **England**, local authorities and social work practitioners should make judgements about visits to balance the risks to children, families and the workforce. Where appropriate, practitioners can keep in contact with children and families without face-to-face contact (DfE, 2020a). The government will provide laptops and tablets for children who have a social worker, to help them stay in touch with the services they need (DfE and Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, 2020).

If a visit in person is necessary, practitioners should follow social distancing and public health guidelines (DfE, 2020a).

Guidance for health visitors states there needs to be an individual assessment of compelling need for face-to-face contact as part of a multi-agency approach. Any face-to-face contact should be agreed by health visitors in discussion with the local safeguarding supervisor and documented (Institute of Health Visiting, 2020).

In **Scotland**, professionals should use their judgement and risk assessments to decide how to maintain sufficient regular direct contact with a child (Scottish Government, 2020d).

In **Wales**, face to face contact between social workers and families should be suspended in the majority of cases. However, the frequency of contact should stay the same unless there are grounds to reduce the frequency of contact based on
information about the care and support needs of the child (Welsh Government, 2020d).

Local authorities and social workers will need to make informed, professional judgements about visiting children at risk, which balance risks to children and risks to the workforce. Social workers and social care staff should follow social distancing guidance when visiting private households (Welsh Government, 2020d).

Where it is felt that a physical sight of a child is necessary because of the level of risk for the child, social workers should use innovative ways of working such as speaking to families at a safe distance from the front door or through windows and/or seeing children at a safe distance (Welsh Government, 2020d).

The British Association of Social Workers (BSAW) advises practitioners and organisations to minimise face-to-face home visits and utilise technology to maintain contact with children and families. Home visits should only be made if:

- a risk assessment deems it absolutely necessary to prevent significant harm
- it is to fulfil a statutory duty that cannot be fulfilled in any other way
- the risk of infection has been mitigated

What if families don’t want to let practitioners in their homes?

In England, practitioners should make contact with families who are anxious about infection risks and explain why it is essential that they have access to the home or see and speak to children. If families refuse access for any reason and there is a risk to the life of the child or likelihood of serious harm, professionals should follow procedures set out in statutory guidance, Working together to safeguard children (DfE, 2020a; DfE, 2018).

How should practitioners identify and help children and families in need of support?

In England, there is guidance for commissioners and providers of services for people who use drugs or alcohol, which practitioners in other sectors and nations may wish to refer to as an example of best practice (Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England (PHE), 2020).

The Institute of Health Visiting has also published guidance for health visitors working with vulnerable families during COVID-19 (Institute of Health Visiting, 2020).

What should social workers do if parents of vulnerable children don’t want to send them to school?

In England, social workers and schools should work with parents of vulnerable children who don’t want their children to go to school. Social workers and schools
should explore the reasons for this and encourage parents to allow their children to attend (DfE, 2020a).

Can children who don’t live with one or both parents still have contact with them?

Across the UK, people must comply with social distancing guidelines. However, the guidelines state that where parents do not live in the same household, children under 18 can move between their parents’ homes (Cabinet Office, 2020; Scottish Government, 2020d; Welsh Government, 2020b).

Where parents agree, temporary variations can be made to contact arrangements. Further guidance on what to do if parents don’t agree is available for each nation (Court of Session, 2020; Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020a; Judiciary NI, 2020).

In England, it is expected that contact between children in care and their birth relatives will continue. Contact arrangements should be assessed on a case by case basis, taking into account social distancing guidelines and the needs of the child. For the most part, keeping in touch will need to take place virtually (DfE, 2020a).

In Wales, the government has stated that although guidance from the Courts and Tribunals Judiciary is directed at separated families subject to private law proceedings, the principles are relevant to any child who is separated from family members (for example children in care). If there is court ordered contact and contact is unable to take place or happens remotely, local authorities should record the reasons for their decisions (Welsh Government, 2020d).

Face-to-face contact should only be taking place in the most exceptional circumstances or where the well-being of the child is significantly impacted by not doing so. Children’s social services should consider how children can have supervised contact with family members using video conferencing. For example, this could take place in the home of their foster carer, with a staff member present during the video conference to maintain levels of supervision (Welsh Government, 2020d).

What support is available for care leavers?

In England, local authorities should continue to do their best to meet statutory duties such as providing personal advisers to care leavers and preparing or reviewing pathway plans. If they need to alter the support they are able to offer during this period they should assess needs and prioritise the most vulnerable (DfE, 2020a).

Local authorities should act in the best interests of care leavers and use their discretion to assess whether care leavers should continue to transition into suitable accommodation and/or independence or remain in their placement during this period.
(DfE, 2020a). The Education Secretary has asked local authorities to ensure nobody has to leave care during the pandemic (DfE and Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, 2020).

Local authorities are encouraged to utilise additional government funding to provide discretionary payments to care leavers to cover items such as food, utilities and rent during this period if required (DfE, 2020a). Care leavers will be provided with laptops and tablets to help them stay in touch with the services they need (DfE and Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, 2020).

In **Northern Ireland**, available resources for care leavers will be targeted at those young people with high support needs (Department of Health, 2020f).

In **Wales**, local authorities should continue to meet statutory duties, including offering personal advisers to care leavers and preparing or reviewing pathway plans using innovative ways. If local authorities need to alter the support they are able to offer care leavers during this period, they should assess needs and prioritise the most vulnerable (Welsh Government, 2020d).

Where appropriate, personal advisers should use technology to contact young people and minimise the need for face-to-face contact. Personal advisers should use their own judgement on the level and frequency of contact for each care leaver, taking into account their individual circumstances and levels of vulnerability but assuming that care leavers are likely to need more support than usual in this difficult situation (Welsh Government, 2020d).

A bespoke package of support for care leavers has been circulated to local authorities. The St David’s Day Fund can be given to care leavers who are experiencing financial hardship due to income loss, difficulty with tenancy agreements, food and other basic living necessities during the coronavirus outbreak (Welsh Government, 2020c).

The government assumes that care leavers will be supported to remain in their current accommodation during the pandemic, where the placement is meeting their needs. However local authorities and their care leavers can continue with plans to transition into suitable accommodation and/or independence if the local authority is confident they can provide the appropriate levels of support and guidance (Welsh Government, 2020d).

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**More ways to help you protect children**

- Sign up to CASPAR to stay up-to-date with the latest safeguarding legislation and guidance.
  [nspcc.org.uk/caspar](nspcc.org.uk/caspar)
- Visit NSPCC Learning for more information about safeguarding during the coronavirus pandemic.
- Visit Childline for advice and resources for children about the coronavirus pandemic.