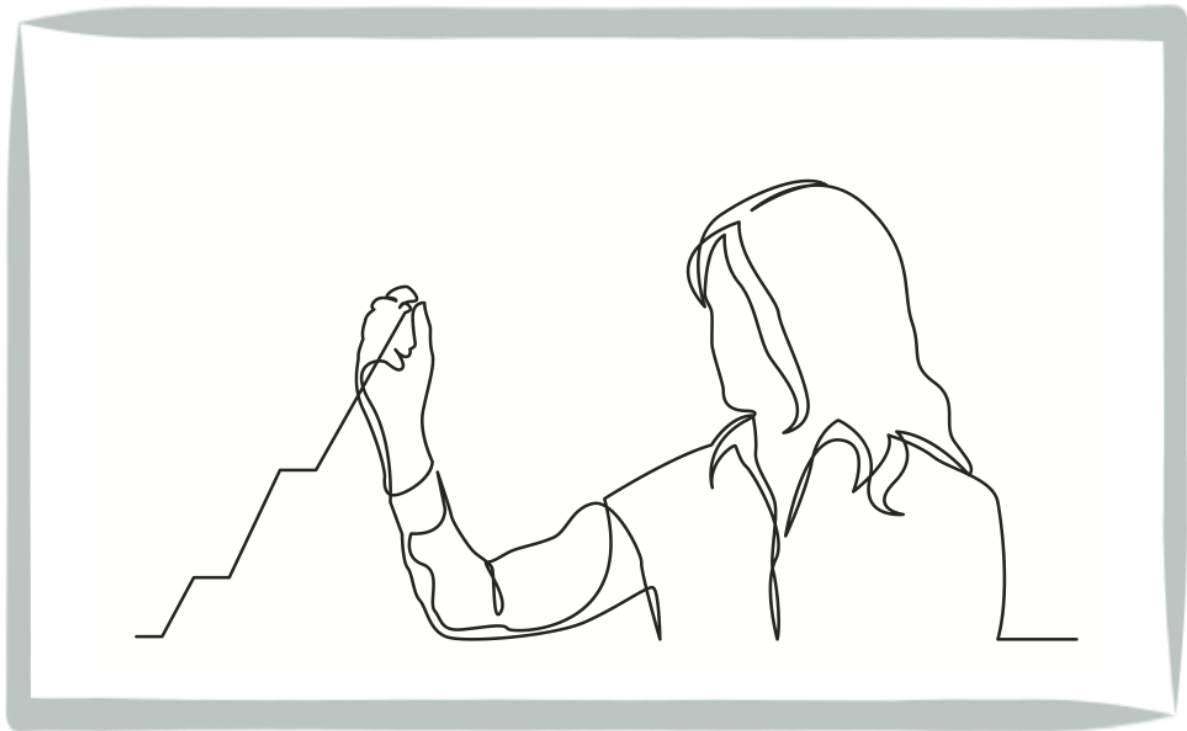




centre for
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Doing Better Things Together

UK Social Work in the Time of Covid-19



A six-week research study into the impact of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the social work profession.

Centre for Action Learning
September 2020

Thank you to all the social workers across the UK, who participated in this research. We are grateful for your willingness to openly and constructively share your thoughts and experiences with the social work profession and employers.

UK Social Work in the Time of Covid-19, a six-week research study into the impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the social work profession.

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Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings an action research study into the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on social work in the UK over a 6 week over a six-week period between 17th April and 29th May 2020.

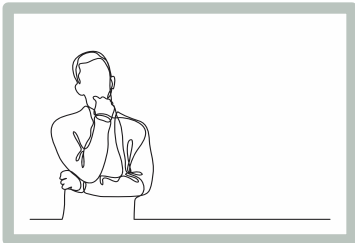
The research mapped the changes in social work as workers addressed the health and safety concerns of delivering services, working remotely, and supporting their own families through the pandemic. We took an action research approach with a number of iterative cycles which included:

- Weekly surveys with 217 social workers
- Interviews with 52 social workers, 31 of whom were interviewed more than once.

The survey focused on the emotions that were being expressed, what was helping and hindering social workers doing their job and what needed to happen next. The interviews were designed to allow the interviewees to expand their answers and tell us about the innovations they were making in their practice.

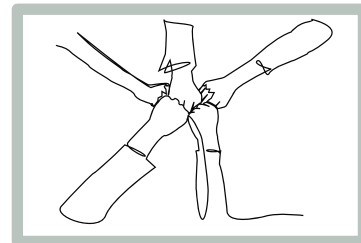
Although this report focuses on six overall themes that surfaced from all the data we collected. In order to support ongoing reflection and discussion within social work teams we also published a [weekly snapshot summaries in our website](#) of the emerging themes and 'golden threads' from the survey and interview data (pg. 21 & 22). We produced a word cloud each week that showed the emotions social workers reported and a final [visual graphic](#) that visually demonstrates how emotions changed over the 6 weeks. Everyone who participated was invited to give feedback on the finding each week and was in turn incorporated into the findings.

Six overall themes emerged that are described in more detail in the report:



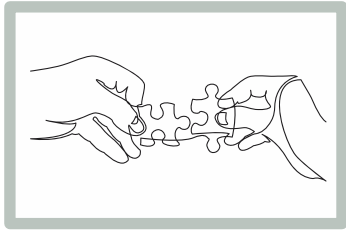
1. Personal and Professional Development. - *Student and NQSW training, reflective space, resilience and emotional wellbeing.*

Responding to the needs of students and NQSW's, peer support groups and the conversion of face to face training to virtual all helped social workers feel supported. There was recognition of the mental health of staff and building their resilience as emotions changed from anxious and frustrated to overwhelmed and isolated.



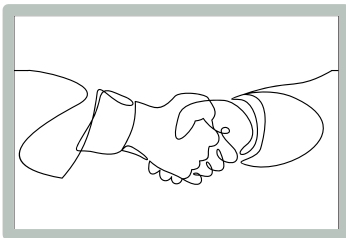
2. Leadership & Teamwork - *Communication, leadership, informal team support and decision making.*

The quality and quantity of engagement with others played a key role as leaders and team members found new ways of motivating and communicating with each other. We found many examples of how leaders did this and the difference it made to the morale and productivity of staff. One of the deepest frustrations throughout the system was decision making. Organisations who empowered staff to make decisions on the front-line with a clear policy on escalation were valued.



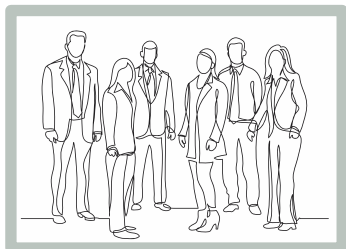
3. Resources - Home working and environment, IT, PPE, and returning to the office.

Difficulty in finding a space at home that allowed for confidentiality and appropriate boundaries with other family members was common with the added challenge of Information technology (IT) availability and broadband connectivity. Multi-agency working is hampered when different agencies use different IT systems. The management of risk with availability of PPE, testing, and safe working practices were raised particularly in relation to high risk staff groups.



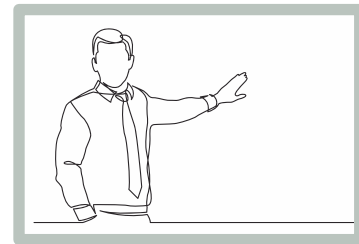
4. Service Delivery - Communication with people who access services, multi-agency/disciplinary working, managing risk, referrals and families.

Staff and leaders were innovating and adapting continuously and often boldly throughout the six-week period. That innovation often meant building stronger relationships with people who use services and between departments within an organisation and between organisations in the social care system.



5. Wider Society - Government guidelines, recognition, society response

There is a fear that the combination of a lack of clear guidance from Government and the easing of lockdown will result in further spikes in the pandemic. Whereas other professions had been recognised for their role in the pandemic, social workers felt they had been neglected despite being on the front-line and felt more should be done by employers and professional bodies to advocate for their work.



6. Long-Term Impact - Financial, safeguarding, mental health, nature of social work in the future.

The theme of austerity both for those organisations delivering services and those receiving them was at the fore front of social workers minds with the expected rise in cases and the reduction in budget. The proven ability to work from home with colleagues and clients was both welcomed and feared. It was welcomed for its flexibility, if home working and technology conditions allowed, but feared in the sense that remotely delivered social work could become the norm in an organisation who needs to cut costs.

Dotted throughout the report we have included quotes from participating social workers so that you hear their direct voice to give greater depth and context to what we have described. Included after each relevant overall theme is a list of innovative ideas that participants shared with us, in the hope that we may be inspired by, and learn with and from each other's social work practice.

Finally, we have offered ideas and techniques you can use with your colleagues to explore the themes raised in the context of your organisation or team.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Forward	5
Introduction	5
Overall Themes	6
Personal and Professional Development	6
Education and Continuous Professional Development	6
Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing	6
Reflective Space	7
Innovations in Personal and Professional Development	7
Leadership and Teamwork	8
Leadership	8
Informal Support from Colleagues	8
Team Communication	9
Decision Making	9
Innovations in Leadership and Teamwork	9
Resources	9
Home Working and Home Environment	9
Information technology (IT)	10
Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)	10
Office Working	10
Innovations in Resources	11
Service Delivery	11
Communication	11
Multi-Agency/Multi-Disciplinary Working	12
Risk	12
Referrals	12
Families	13
Innovations in Service Delivery	13
Wider Society	14
Government Guidance	14
Recognition	15
Societal Response	15

Longer-Term Impact	15
Financial Impact	15
Safeguarding	15
Mental Health	16
Nature of Social Work	16
Further Resources to Support a Collaborative Exploration	17
Research Methodology	18
Survey Question Framework	18
Interview Question Framework	18
How Social Workers Were Feeling	19
Weekly Sub Themes and Golden Threads	19
Weekly Sub-Themes from the Survey	19
Weekly Sub-Themes and Golden Threads from the Survey & Interviews	20
Weekly Snapshot Mapping Table	21
About Us - Centre For Action Learning	23

Foreword

The challenges the COVID -19 pandemic has brought are complex and do not have one clear *right* answer. For those involved in social care, progress to resolve these challenges is requiring a collaborative effort from social workers, social work organisations, partner providers, community stakeholders and of course, people who use social care services. As the problems are complex, uncertain and often interconnected, we believe that we are best equipped to resolve them by *doing better things together* and especially by using the ideas of action learning and action research, an approach we have used here. This involves structured processes bringing affected people together to question, collaborate, and to take action to explore the unknown.

'The irony is that being part of this actually been quite important in its own right for me as a professional person. I actually quite look forward to being part of the survey and having that conversation with somebody who was actually quite interested in how I was as a professional person working in a really difficult environment. So really, the work that you've been doing has been invaluable to me on a personal level because actually it felt like a bit of support as well, so thank you very much'

- Research participant

Although we are all affected by this pandemic, each social worker's experience is their own. In this report, we have therefore not set out to tell you what the answers would be to the unique problems that you and your profession are facing. Your approach will be different depending on who you are, where you live and work and the context, environment and systems you operate within. You will of course, have already developed many responses to these problems. However, it is our hope that you will use this report to support conversations with social workers across your organisation, to facilitate collaborative processes with your teams, the communities you serve and with other partner organisations to find better ways through this crisis together.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the social care sector with complex and challenging problems which have required social workers to solve problems, innovate and build resilience with an urgency not experienced before. At the Centre for Action Learning we believe that it is only by working and collaborating together that we will be able to find our way through this crisis. As the majority of our work is in the support of social work teams, we agreed that we wanted to contribute something back to the profession with a piece of self-funded research which we present here.

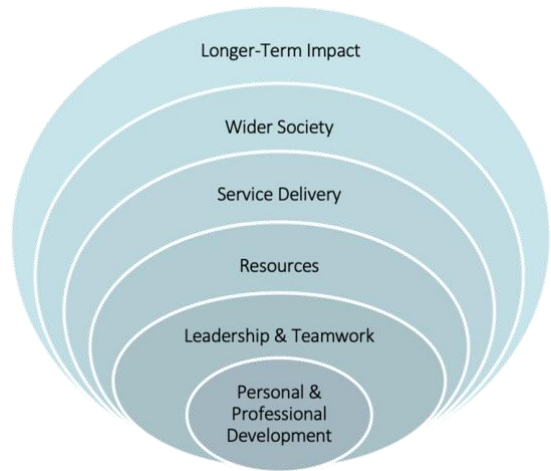
On 20th April 2020, just over a month after UK lockdown began, we invited social workers from across the UK to participate in a study to document their experiences during this pandemic. This study lasted six-weeks and was concluded on the 29th May 2020. Our aim has been to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on UK social work and to use our findings to support the learning and development of the social work profession, social work employers, Government and policy makers. We aimed to discover;

1. How social workers were feeling and how this changed each week.
2. The impact of the pandemic on practice.
3. Innovations and changes in the development of social work practice.

Overall Themes

From all the data collected through the social work surveys and interviews, six overall themes emerged.

A brief explanation of each of the six overall themes is described in the diagram below and will be described in more detail below. All survey and interview comments were counted and grouped to identify subcategories under each overall theme. The subcategories are summarised below in order of the number of comments made (highest to lowest).



Personal & Professional Development	Leadership & Teamwork	Resources	Service Delivery	Wider Society	Longer-Term Impact
The development of staff during the pandemic and the care of self.	The relationships within teams & with leaders throughout the system.	The resources to deliver the service during the pandemic	Providing remote support and services and managing workload.	The relationship between the pandemic & social work in wider society.	The long-term impact on social work/care and the delivery of services.

Personal and Professional Development

Education and Continuous Professional Development

'I don't know how good I will be as I am learning everything virtually. I am not being able to go out and shadow experienced social workers to learn from them which is hard.'

- The disruption or suspension of ASYE programmes was a key concern. Those organisations who prioritised and embedded learning with regular high-quality supervision and critically reflective spaces quickly responded to the pandemic and left NQSW's feeling less isolated.
- Student social workers on placement were reported as being used as administrators as the ability to shadow home visits and more experienced staff diminished.
- CPD opportunities were translated quickly into online or blended options in many organisations. Small bite-size options were preferred in this more learner directed learning environment. In other organisations CPD was simply cancelled or postponed.
- The creation of support groups and networks to facilitate peer to peer learning was seen to be important however it was recognised that this requires skills in self-directed learning.
- The suspension of NAAS (accreditation for SW's) and the uncertainty about its future after lockdown.

Resilience and Emotional Wellbeing

- Social workers reported feeling anxious, tired, and frustrated. They articulated the stress this put them under as they supported vulnerable people and families who also exhibited these emotions.
- Workload was reported to have increased in volume and complexity, influenced by the rise in administrative tasks associated with data reporting.
- Isolation from the support of colleague's and teams played a factor in mental health of social workers. Where emotional health was good this was in correlation with the support available within their organisation and from their manager.
- Initial emotions of frustration anxiety and fear about the impact of the pandemic on their own lives and that of service users progressed to feelings of isolation, tiredness and being overwhelmed.

'I do not know what is going to happen after all this is over, but I know that I cannot work like this for the rest of my career.'

Reflective Space

'In the office you can just lean over and casually organise debriefs and case discussions. Now you need to be more focussed and deliberate about it.'

- The increase in workload together with home working was reported to have a negative impact on the availability and opportunity for reflective practice.
- Social workers reported that pre-COVID-19 lockdown, the time for travel between meetings and home visits was often the time that was used to reflect both back and forward on cases.
- As the weeks progressed some workers found that creating a purposeful alternative was essential.
- The opportunity for spontaneous reflection with others had been lost.

Innovations and Changes in Personal and Professional Development

- Regular scheduled check-ins between staff members.
- Space and permission to have honest conversations between and with others about our physical and emotional health.
- An internal forum where staff posted and responded to topics and shared information and joined different groups of interest.
- Daily 'catch ups' focused on emotional wellbeing.
- Fun activities included in team meetings – for example competitions, quizzes with small prizes posted out to winners.
- Mindfulness classes held by a local mental health charity.
- Independent Reviewing Officers named and praised social workers.
- Free online training for example from Zero Suicide Alliance.
- ASYE year tailored around individual needs
- An extension at the end of the year, if as a result of lockdown, competencies have not been met.
- Emotional wellbeing prioritised for NQSWs
- Emotional support and encouragement to staff to talk about the emotional impact their work is having.

Leadership

- Managers have been making a considered and creative effort to keep in regular contact with their teams and to check on their welfare.
- Many however also reported the inverse of this with some reporting that wellbeing and morale-boosting behaviour had been driven from the bottom up.
- Social workers reported as being micro-managed as remote working started, with additional administration added in order to 'check we are doing the job'. This was described as being demotivating.

'As leader is it about taking a bit of a transformational approach with my team and take them on the journey with me. I know my staff can do their work and will do it. It is about knowing people. I know what each of my staffs' skills are and where to play to their strengths and where their skills lie.'

'My greatest frustration has been the sheer volume of instructions, updates, guidelines, requests for statistics, projections, etc which management say are all 'urgent'; but which are really a distraction to my work with families.'

- Praise and recognition by managers and leaders of the pressures social workers are under, as well as trust in their teams to work well from home has motivated social workers and boosting morale.
- Some managers report the stress and pressure created by the need to manage senior leader's, organisational, and regulatory expectations and demands whilst trying to protect the wellbeing and workload of their teams.
- In some cases, organisational hierarchies have flattened with new opportunities created for senior manager and social workers to discuss ideas, share experiences and ask questions of each other.

Informal Support from Colleagues

- Teams were reported as becoming stronger as they became more focussed on pulling together and supporting each other.
- More time and focus were placed on developing relationships within teams through the use of games, exercises and discussion to better understand each other, build trust and stronger connections between team members.

'Support is actually much better in some ways now as there is much less of an idea of closed office doors. It's more about always being available on the end the phone.'

'If I have had a difficult home visit, I know colleagues will pick this up as I walk through the door and offer support – I now need to ask for it and schedule a call.'

- The informal support in an office, to debrief, to discuss cases or to see when someone needs support after a difficult meeting/visit was missed.
- Support was less spontaneous and casual as online and phone conversations needed to be planned in advance.

Team Communication

- It was challenging for newly qualified social workers and students on placements as they did not have the opportunity to form relationships and networks to help them understand their role and support them in their work.

'I am most concerned about newly qualified social workers and students – the future of our profession.'

Decision Making

'I emailed Head of Department to ask for funding to be agreed and I an agreement more or less straight away. Normally I would have had to beg, plead, justify and would have involved filling in of files etc. These things make a huge difference to me and makes things easier.'

- Decisions about services and resources for families and vulnerable people have been more decentralised. Trust has been given to social workers with only light touch oversight from their manager, to make the right decision.
- In some cases, decision making processes have been less bureaucratic and resulted in speedier decisions.
- Social workers reported a need to foster and support their creativity to find new solutions and support shared learning.

Innovations and Changes in Leadership and Teamwork Practice

- Online meeting fatigue addressed by the option to turn off the microphone or camera depending on their role and level of participation in the meeting.
- Team reflection meetings at least once a week.
- Reflection/supervision sessions increased in frequency
- 'WhatsApp' motivational caption created by a team member each day
- Regular meetings over Skype and Zoom are being held to find out how staff are doing rather than what they are doing.
- Catch-up webinar held by senior management to allow staff to talk to each other and share ideas about working from home.
- Cards sent from the manager to individual team members which messages of appreciation.

Resources

Home Working and Home Environment

- It was difficult for many social workers to find a suitable workspace at home that would be free of interruption and which would guarantee privacy.
- Suitable office equipment and environment was seldomly available when working at home and Health and Safety standards compromised.
- Social workers recognised that boundaries that maintain a work life balance, such as working hours and work breaks were eroded by home working.

'I'm trying to make work conversations confidential and away from my kids, so I am having to take them in the garden shed. I don't want them to hear because of the confidentiality but also because the content of the conversation was really traumatic and don't want my children exposed to that.'

- Over time social workers reported that they had developed techniques and became more vigilant in creating a work-life balance.
- Working with other family members at home created problems for maintaining home-work boundaries – such as confidentiality and keeping the emotional impact of work out of the home/family environment.

Information Technology

'Working from home has pushed the IT system over the edge as it is old and just cannot cope and therefore it's causing extra workload. Sometimes I have to work through the night to get things on the system to then find that on the next day, the system isn't working again. No appreciation of recognition for what have had to do just to get things uploaded, but instead I only get conversations around how to prevent me from accruing TOIL.'

- The availability and distribution of IT equipment and software was key to making home working a success and those local authorities who had established IT infrastructures fared better.
- Sharing information between, and even within organisations was problematic as organisations quickly adopted incompatible web conferencing systems.
- Those social workers with limited confidence and/or experience in using software systems and social media systems took longer to transition to a home working environment.
- The availability and distribution of IT equipment such as laptops /headsets/printers was often limited.
- Some organisations responded to this challenge by giving out vouchers to allow staff to purchase essential equipment online directly.

- Broadband width, IT systems and databases struggled, in some areas to meet the demand, leaving long delays to access or upload information or with systems freezing or crashing.

Personal Protective Equipment.

- The availability and distribution of suitable PPE was reported as insufficient and inconsistent across local authorities and was slow to be made available.
- Social workers felt that regular testing should have been made a priority for them.

Office Working

- Towards the end of lockdown there were concerns about the risks associated with returning to the office, including the need to travel on public transport.
- Concerns were expressed about the higher risks for social workers from BAME backgrounds.
- Some teams were still expected to work from the office with rota systems and night working created to ensure social distancing.

'I do think that local authorities need to think about impact on BAME workers. I need my organisation show that they are already thinking about it.'

Innovations and Changes in Resources

- Splitting the team in half and alternating with one half working from home and one in the office with the weekend used for deep cleaning.
- Vouchers sent to staff to allow them to directly purchase essential equipment online.
- Teams working shifts at night.
- Desks blocked off where social distancing is not possible.
- A one-way system around office.
- Encouraging exercise breaks.
- Booking out a large meeting room to allow the team to work together once a week in the same space, with desks/tables arranged at distance.
- An agreed 30-minute breaks between meetings and appointments.
- Zoom virtual backgrounds – or similar on other platforms encouraged to reduce exposure into a worker's private space.
- Dedicated workspace in the home preferably with a door that can be opened and closed at the beginning and end of the day

Service Delivery

Communication

- Many advantages regarding communication were reported on the virtual delivery of services including;
 - An enhanced ability to reach and engage young people who appeared to be more receptive to video/text communication.
 - An enhanced quality of conversation with service users being more relaxed and less anxious in their own environment.
 - Service users sharing more through pictures or artefacts of daily life.
 - The more consistent contact with families and service users

'I've learned that we actually can't substitute face to face contact – it doesn't matter how skilled in talking over phone or social media we are, it is difficult to assess and support people properly without that presence and that reassurance.'

However, there were concerns including;

- Communicating remotely with those with specific communication barriers (e.g. disability or language) or when the assessment is complex.
- Decision making when consent was not adequately provided.
- The challenge of building relationships with *new* service users (as opposed to keeping in contact with existing ones).
- Limitations of video calling in making accurate assessments and observations
The lack of skills required for virtual communication.

Multi-Agency/Multi-Disciplinary Working

- There were concerns about the transfer of people who access services from one part of the care system to another with the lack of multi-agency working to ensure that risks were minimised.
- There were examples of managing low resources e.g. care workers in schools as childminders, or replacing respite stays with long day time activities.
- Different services and agencies having different protocols, e.g. health, education, and social care.
- There was concern that social workers are expected to continue working as normal whereas other agencies were prohibited from face to face contact.

'Multidisciplinary side of work has been a lot more about building better relationships with schools and particularly head teachers when in the past was just with teacher or teaching group in class – now getting more interaction with head teachers which provides better understanding of what both sides are going through right now.'

Risk

'Our guidance is a little bit confusing and open to interpretation which is difficult.'

- There was anxiety about catching the virus when doing essential visits. P.P.E. and protective processes being reported as inadequate to 'fulfil our statutory duties'.
- Concern about the implications of making decisions virtually that may be detrimental to families and children including the threat of punishment for 'getting it wrong' or it being used as an excuse to delay decision-making.

'I feel frustrated and torn – on one hand don't want to put people or myself at risk. In some ways don't know what we don't know.'

'A lot of us haven't been tested so we don't know if we are carriers or if other people are – but [home-visits] a lot of the time is the only way that we can do our job.'

- There was more willingness to allow social workers and frontline managers to problem-solve.
- When conducting essential home visits, there was also increase anxiety about managing the risks of bringing the virus into the home.
- Conflicting rules and guidance about how to manage risk when conducting visits and carry out working practices and procedures. These have not always been consistent across teams and departments especially in light of perceived ambiguity from Central Government.

Referrals

- The number of referrals changed during lockdown with police intervention becoming more likely as opportunities for early intervention were restricted.
- Other concerns were raised about the general reduction in referrals as children and vulnerable people were not being seen by schools and support services.

'We have been asked to get rid of most of the longer-term cases so that we have capacity for the many new cases that will emerge.'

- A concern for a potential spike in safeguarding and domestic abuse referrals post-lockdown and the impact that this will have on depleted teams and available resources.

Families

'We are beginning to go see some of families really struggle and resources are getting very scarce. We are starting to run into a time where we have families that are on brink of crisis and don't have staff or resources to adequately support them.'

- Although some families and carers were coping much better than expected, others were reported to be at breaking point as the support services they relied on were severely reduced or unavailable during lockdown.
- Concern that some families and carers were disguising the reality of their experiences for fear of how social services will react to their situation.

- For some autistic people the change to routines with the closure of day services, schools and after school support was leading to an increase in challenging behaviour and carer strain.
- In some cases, people who access services were given more autonomy, given the restrictions in delivering services and had responded well that led social workers to question the cautious nature of risk taking in the profession.

'We have seen that some people have been managing well for this period without social worker. I am asking the question, 'am I creating a dependence on social work?'

Innovations and Changes in Service Delivery

- When normal care provisions were absent, alternative activities for people with disabilities, were delivered by care workers to provide respite for families.
- Foster carers, who are now also home-tutoring children, being given an extra £10 a week to buy craft materials.
- Children and Teenagers using <https://www.kooth.com> to support their mental health.
- Netflix and Disney+ subscriptions provided to some young people to help them cope during lockdown.
- Personal Education Plan funding being used creatively to help children buy resources to assist with home schooling – one child requested wood supplied so that he could build a skate ramp, other examples include baking and photography equipment.
- Resource packs for children who are not at school. Packs of colouring sheets and activities that they can do as a family with links to educational websites and online youth services exercises that are available.
- Virtual support groups and webinars for families.
- New ways of making safe face to face contact with people who use services. For example, 'I've been working with a 15-year-old who struggles to contain her emotions. We've started taking outdoor walks together which has really helped to de-escalate her mood. Doing something physical has been a great way to connect with her and I think I'll continue to use this idea after the virus.'
- Website lockdown advice and support shared via text with people who access services <https://sites.google.com/view/thestayingathometoolkit/home>

- AMHPs being shared across neighbouring local authority areas.
- Social workers from other teams (e.g. hospitals) taking part in webinars to share experiences.
- MDT meetings expanded to include a wider range of professionals across the system to co-ordinate better ways of working.
- A template developed to use for a 3-month review, that all professionals can access and add to during the MDT meetings.
- Using care agencies to send workers into schools to cover for the staff in recognition that at the moment schools are predominantly childminding facilities.
- Virtual case conferences and multidisciplinary meetings had the benefit of more people being able to attend and the discovery that some families and young people feel more comfortable with virtual attendance.
- RAG risk assessment system for COVID-19.
- A letter for those supporting people with complex needs explaining why a family is not self-isolating.
- Less decisions being taken by panel but made locally.
- Children's homes created gardens and ponds, a zipwire, an 'outdoor discovery centre' etc. Inter home competitions around creative ideas
- Virtual information evenings for prospective adopters.
- Virtual initial visits with prospective adopters.
- WhatsApp, Facetime and Skype used to keep in touch particularly with the younger generation have been effective.
- A text system being used to maintain a daily check-in, for those for whom there is most concern, asking them to report on how they feel on a scale of 1-10. Scores under 3 or non-responders followed up with a phone call.
- Old unused council laptops have been reconditioned and given out to young people.
- System to buy data for smart phones for clients who do not want or cannot use their data allowance on a videocall.

Wider Society

Government Guidance

'There is some anxiety about what the future is going to entail and some of that is brought about by having to manage the ambiguous and unhelpful messages from Government about schools opening next week. It is a dog's breakfast and we don't know what we are dealing with.'

- The guidance from Central Government, which was perceived to be open to misinterpretation causing frustration and confusion.
- The unclear timeframe and plan for the easing of lockdown, the reopening of schools and arrangements over the school holidays.

Recognition

- Social workers reported feeling that they had not been recognised as key workers by the Government or the public.
- Many felt that more needs to be done to advocate for the social work profession in the public arena.
- A fear that once things return to normal Government will forget the role that social work played in supporting individuals and in keeping families together.

'Continuing to ignore social workers in the news and media is a huge bugbear of mine. Social workers get lost in the dialogue about keyworkers. In the news you hear a lot about nurses, doctors, teachers and carers but social workers get lost.'

Societal Response

- There is a fear that as lockdown is eased and schools open, society will not follow social distancing guidelines, which may lead to a further spike in cases leading subsequent waves.

Longer-Term Impact

Financial Impact

'I'm also worried about the financial cost and the consequences that this will have on us. Local authorities may find themselves back where they were in 2010– services may be fully stripped back again to recover some of the costs to the Government.'

- Financial instability will rise and those already on low incomes will become more vulnerable as they become unable to meet the additional expenses incurred. For example:
 - Laptops phones and internet access for online learning for children not at school.
 - Costs of living increases of those remaining at home resulting in families being short of food and other essentials.
 - Family carers unable to help due to isolation rules.
- The long-term impact on the finances of those providing services, with charities finding funding more challenging with many of their income streams cut off for example, shops and fundraising events together with local authorities who are already struggling financially managing the increase in demand.
- An acute awareness of the effect that 'austerity' has had on social care and the resultant economic impact that the pandemic will have on the future of social work and social care in general (staff, services, resources, threshold criteria).

Safeguarding

- For children the school was reported to provide the 'safest place to be'. With schools closed for long periods, abuse and neglect in the home will therefore be magnified.
- Staff shortages were raised as being a potential contributing factor for vulnerable people who may slip under the radar with delays in assessments or provision of services. This may be especially true for those not formally recognised by the social care system.

'Children who may be at risk are just not getting seen. We know we have an increase in domestic violence cases as a result of lockdown and I suspect that this is the case for children too – but we are just not able to find out about it.'

- The increase of online communication could expose vulnerable people to exploitation and child grooming

Mental Health

'In the coming months I worry there will be a tsunami of mental health cases...there must be lots of people who have kept a lid on it until now and they will eventually need support.'

- Social isolation was the key concern with the people social workers work with being disproportionately affected during lockdown.
- People using services who are managing, being presented with new stressors at a time when there is a loss of access to coping mechanisms for example outdoor activities and connection with others in a social environment particularly those without access to digital connection.
- With a reduced access to mental health services there are fears that either new cases or known cases which have escalated will result in higher demand for services and an increase in the severity of cases.

Nature of Social Work

- During the pandemic most, social workers were home-working and when the suitable technology was available this proved successful and potentially had many benefits including cost savings made by a reduction in travel costs both financial and time.
- Virtual communication has created new opportunities to engage with people who use services – especially young people who responded positively. However social workers felt less skilled in this virtual communication for social work purposes.
- Where there is a place for virtual communication the cost savings made may drive employers to avoid returning to face to face working altogether and therefore, they would lose the relational aspect of social work.

'I'm concerned that we don't get so carried away believing that we can get things done remotely using technology and that we go further down the road of losing the human contact that we need to be able to do the job effectively and that we don't forget about the soft skills that we need.'

Further Resources to Support a Collaborative Exploration of the Research Themes

We have prepared a range of resources available free from our website to support you, your teams, and other stakeholders with collaborative problem-solving and decision-making activities.

Click on the images below to download the corresponding resource or go to <http://www.centreforactionlearning.com/covid-19-research/>



Complexity Map

- A large group, structured facilitative process to generate a shared sense, context and background for a particular initiative, challenge before agreeing priority areas for mobilisation and action.



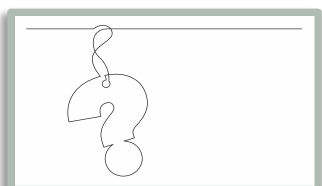
World Café

- A simple, interactive, table-top group exercise to explore key questions and encourage large group dialogue and understanding.



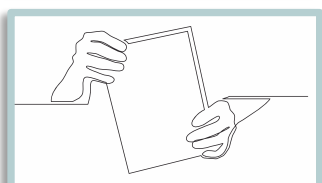
Problem Brief

- A personal reflective worksheet to help understanding, framing and communicating a problem or challenge.



Thinking – Feeling – Willing Questions

- A range of sample questions from a model developed by the Centre for Action Learning to support critical inquiry and reflection.



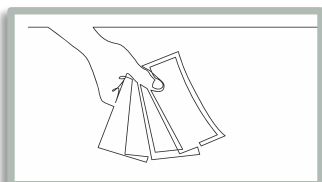
4 (plus 1) Questions

- An individual or collective tool to reflect on past experiences, actions, knowledge, understanding and experiences to assist with agreeing on next actionable steps.



A Guide for Effective Virtual (Remote) Group Meetings

- A guide developed by the Centre for Action Learning to support effective virtual meetings.



Action Learning Facilitator Card Pack

- A series of hand-held cards to guide action learning set facilitators to work with action learning sets. * £11.20 per pack (plus p. & p.)

Research Methodology

Our research was conducted over a six-week period between 17th April and 29th May 2020. We took an action research approach with a number of iterative cycles.

Weekly Surveys.

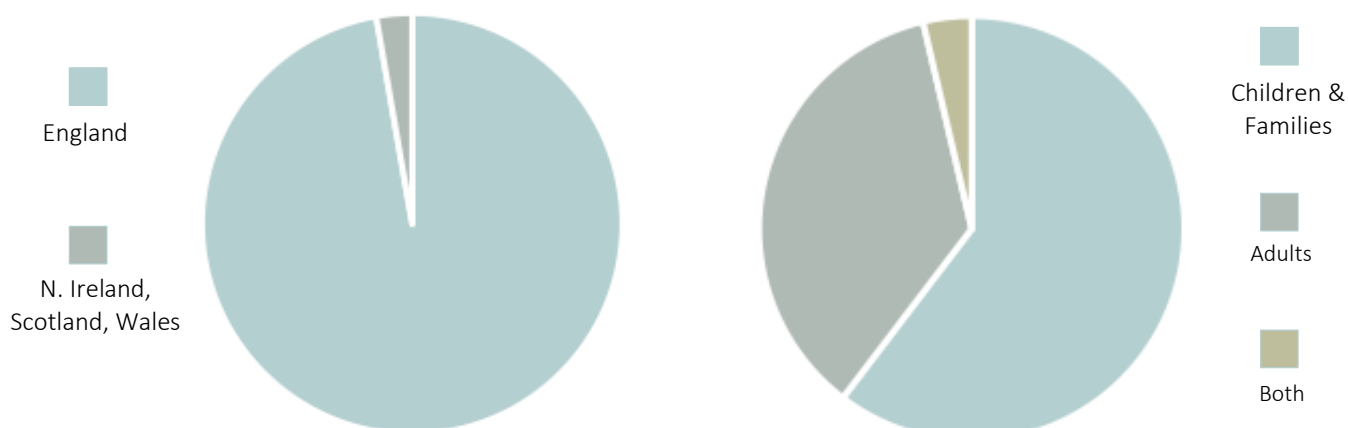
Data was collected via an online survey promoted on social media and our website and distributed each week to our database of known social workers. 217 social workers took part.

Interviews.

Those who had taken part in the survey were invited to take part in follow up conversations to gather a more in-depth understanding of their experiences. 53 people were interviewed with 31 being interviewed more than once over the time period.

We took a social constructionist approach listening to and recording conversations which we then analysed for themes. At the end of each week we published for comment the key themes as 'weekly snapshots'. Interview participants were invited to an online workshop at the conclusion of the data collection phase to give feedback on our initial conclusions and to provide direction on how we should communicate them more widely.

Participants by Location and Service



Survey Question Framework

The weekly survey asked the following questions

1. What are the three words you would use to describe how you are feeling now?
2. What's helping you do your job right now?
3. What is hindering you doing your job right now?
4. What needs to happen next to help you do your job?

Interview Question Framework

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a framework loosely based on the 4 (plus 1) Learning Log. The following questions were used to guide the research conversations.

1. What sense did you make of the snapshot summary we published last week?' (asked only in repeat interviews).
2. How are you feeling this week?
3. What have you tried that is new?
4. What have you learned?
5. What are you most proud of at the moment?
6. What are you most concerned about at the moment?
7. What needs to happen next – in the short and longer term?
8. What might be the long-term impact of this crisis on the way you work?

Social Workers' Feelings

From the survey's first question the diagram below describes the top 3 emotions most commonly reported. You can view the animated word cloud which maps social workers changing emotions [on our website](#).

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustrated • Anxious • Isolated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious • Frightened • Tired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frustrated • Anxious • Uncertain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tired • Uncertain • Busy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worried • Isolated • Stressed/Tired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worried • Overwhelmed • Anxious/ Isolated/Tired

Weekly Sub-Themes and Golden Threads

Weekly Sub-Themes from the Survey.

From the surveys second third and fourth questions the key themes that emerged from their answers each week is summarised below;

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Help	Team work & Technology		Supportive Management and Colleagues			
			Equipment for Home Working	Good Team Morale	Self-Care	
Hinder	Connectivity of Systems	Changing Guidance	Lack of Face to face Contact with People Who Use Services & Families	Lack of guidance from Government	Communication with Agencies, Service users & Families	Homeworking & its Safety
	Home & Remote Working			Not being able to carry out proper assessments	Self-Motivation as a Lone /homeworker	Isolation
Action Needed	Making PPE Available	Making PPE Available & Guidance in its use	Making Testing & PPE Available	Clear Direction & Guidance from Organisations & Government		Schools Re-Opening Fully
	Making Testing Available	Guidance & Leadership	Multi agency Working	Better IT Connectivity	Getting Back to Work Safely	

Weekly Sub-Themes and Golden Threads from the Survey & Interviews.

This report focuses on six overall themes that surfaced from all the data we collected. However, in order to support ongoing reflection and discussion within social teams, we also published a [weekly snapshot summaries in our website](#) of the emerging themes and *golden thread* from the survey and interview data. The feedback we received was incorporated into the research.

A summary of the weekly themes and golden threads can be found below.

Week 1	<p><i>Golden Thread: Technology.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Communication and Support to People Who Use Services.▪ The Role of Leadership.▪ Individual and Team Resilience.
Week 2	<p><i>Golden Thread: Intensification of Social Services.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Impact on Families.▪ Impact on Social Work.▪ Teams Working Together.▪ Post Covid Concerns.
Week 3	<p><i>Golden Thread: Sustainability.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Work/Life Balance and Boundaries.▪ Criticality of Mutual Support Between Social Workers.▪ Role of Social Workers in the Current Risk Climate.
Week 4	<p><i>Golden Thread: Capacity.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Families at Breaking Point.▪ Returning to Work and Government Guidance for the Immediate Future.▪ Future of Social Work – the Long-Term Impact on the Profession.
Week 5	<p><i>Golden Thread: The Future.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Confronting the Limitations of Online/Telephone Communication.▪ Normalising to a New Way of Working & Organising.▪ Concern for Future Surge and Capacity to Respond.▪ Balancing Complex Sets of Risks.
Week 6	<p><i>Golden Thread: Identity of Social Work.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Ways of Working Creating Barriers to Practice.▪ Disconnect with Social Work Practice.▪ Exit Strategy and the Need for Clarity.▪ New Levels of Empowerment and Autonomy.

The table included on the following pages (pg.21 & 22), maps these weekly *golden threads* and sub-themes to their location in this report.

G. Thread	Weekly Themes	Overall Theme	Sub-Theme	Page
Week 1	Communication and Support to People Who Use Services	Service Delivery	Communication	10
			Risk	12
	The Role of Leadership	Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Informal Support from Colleagues	8
Week 2	Individual and Team Resilience	Personal & Professional Development	Team Communication	8
			Decision Making	9
	Impact on Families	Wider Society	Resilience	6
			Recognition	15
			Service Delivery	13
			Longer-Term Impact	15
	Impact on Social Work	Personal & Professional Development	Mental Health	16
			Education & CPD	6
	Teams Working Together	Leadership & Teamwork	Resilience	6
			Informal Support from Colleagues	8
Team Communication			8	
Multi-Agency/Multi-Disciplinary Working			12	
Post Covid Concerns	Service Delivery	IT	10	
		Referrals	12	
		Financial Impact	15	
		Mental Health	16	
Week 3	Work/Life Balance and Boundaries	Personal & Professional Development	Resilience	6
			Reflective Space	7
	Criticality of Mutual Support Between Social Workers	Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Resilience	6
	Role of Social Workers in the Current Risk Climate	Resources	Informal Support from Colleagues	8
			PPE	10
Office Working			10	
Risk			12	
		Longer-Term Impact	Nature of Social Work	16

Week 4	<i>Capacity</i>	Families at Breaking Point	Longer-Term Impact	Financial Impact	15
			Service Delivery	Families	13
			Wider Society	Government Guidance	14
			Resources	Office Working	10
			Wider Society	Government Guidance	14
				Societal Response	15
			Personal & Professional Development	Resilience	6
			Wider Society	Recognition	15
			Longer Term Impact	Financial Impact	15
				Nature of Social Work	16
Week 5	<i>The Future</i>	Confronting the Limitations of Online/Telephone Communication	Leadership and Teamwork	Informal Support from Colleagues	8
			Resources	IT	10
			Service Delivery	Communication	12
				Leadership	8
			Leadership & Teamwork	Team Communication	8
				Decision Making	9
			Service Delivery	Risk	12
			Service Delivery	Referrals	12
			Longer-Term Impact	Financial Impact	15
				Mental Health	16
Week 6	<i>Identity of Social Work</i>	Balancing Complex Sets of Risks	Resources	Office Working	10
			Service Delivery	Risk	12
			Wider Society	Government Guidance	14
			Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Leadership & Teamwork	Informal Support from Colleagues	8
			Longer-Term Impact	Team Communication	8
			Personal & Professional Development	Nature of Social Work	16
			Wider Society	Resilience	6
				Government Guidance	14
				Societal Response	15
Week 6	<i>Identity of Social Work</i>	Ways of Working Creating Barriers to Practice.	Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Leadership & Teamwork	Informal Support from Colleagues	8
			Longer-Term Impact	Team Communication	8
			Personal & Professional Development	Nature of Social Work	16
			Wider Society	Resilience	6
				Government Guidance	14
				Societal Response	15
			Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Longer-Term Impact	Decision Making	9
				Nature of Social Work	16
Week 6	<i>Identity of Social Work</i>	Exit Strategy and the Need for Clarity.	Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Longer-Term Impact	Decision Making	9
				Nature of Social Work	16
			Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Longer-Term Impact	Decision Making	9
				Nature of Social Work	16
			Leadership & Teamwork	Leadership	8
			Longer-Term Impact	Decision Making	9
				Nature of Social Work	16
				Nature of Social Work	16

The Centre for Action Learning is a network organisation of consultants working under the banner 'Better Together' – a form that reflects our individual expertise and the belief that organisations and individuals work better together, often by creating new ways of organising.

58

Countries

Together we specialise in using action learning methodologies to build internal capacity within social care and health organisations. We have diverse experience in working with a wide range of private and public organisations by drawing together our collective expertise and experience of leadership, coaching, research, evaluation and facilitation. Our approach is to walk alongside you as a skilful guide, initially showing you the way and building your organisational capacity and capability, before stepping back to let you and your teams take the lead.

319

Organisations

120

Local
Authorities

To date we have worked in 58 countries and over 1,500 people have registered on our ILM programmes of learning. Of the 320 organisations we have supported, 119 have been with UK local authorities.

1537

ILM
Students

Using action learning and action research as our core approaches and as vehicle for individual and organisational learning, we provide a range of specialist OD consultancy and learning and development programmes, including;

- Action Research and evaluation
- Consultancy support to resolve real business, societal and systemic problems
- Action Learning Facilitation training (Foundation, Advanced and Senior Practitioner Programmes).
- Leadership programmes including ILM accredited qualifications (Level 5 Certificate in Leadership and Management)

For more information please contact ask@centreforactionlearning.com



ask@centreforactionlearning.com



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