

# IASW Social Work During Covid-19 Ongoing Survey

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## Lockdown Data (12<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> May 2020)

### Children and Families Social Workers

#### BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

When the Covid-19 pandemic began to hit Ireland, sweeping changes to how we live impacted on how social work is practiced and on those who need and use social work services. Our society has rapidly changed as we live lives shaped by social distancing and social isolation, the shift to home working, loss of employment and earnings and the loss of school and childcare supports. These losses have been compounded by the reduction and absence of many essential services to support, safeguard and protect the most vulnerable. Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions have had a profound impact on the way various services, including social work, are delivered.

The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) saw that crucial information on how and whether social workers were supported to do the work they need to do was missing. We had a unique opportunity to capture the key issues for social work, to identify solutions and responses of the social work profession and to build on what works in adapting to the complex working conditions in which social workers find themselves. Funding was sought and provided by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs to conduct an ongoing survey of social work during this time. Permission was also sought and received from the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to replicate and adapt their **Social work during Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Ongoing Survey**.

This is the first report on the survey data and presents the findings on the data collected during the final week of lockdown from the 12<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> May, approximately seven weeks after lockdown began at midnight on Friday, 27<sup>th</sup> March. This report presents the key messages from the survey data in respect of the Children and Families cohort, before summarising the data from responses to each question. Data on those who participated in the survey can be found at the end of the report.

#### KEY MESSAGES

The biggest challenge for social workers in Children and Families was the impact of lockdown restrictions on face to face contact and direct work with children and families and the resultant impact on relationships. Additional challenges identified were working from home, lack of organisational support and management of childcare.

Social workers' main worry was about the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children and families, many specifically concerned about children exposed to risk or isolated in their home environments without access to their usual support networks. They also worried about foster carers and transmission of the virus during access as well as the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions on the quality of communication and relationships.

There were a range of concerns about the consequences of working in new ways during Covid-19. Some worried about the quality of their assessments, missing important information and making mistakes in the absence of face to face contact with children and families.

Social workers identified a number of examples of worthwhile learning and positive practice developments that could be built on. These include advances in the use of technology in practice, prioritising contact and communication with service users, as well as examples of positive, supportive team practice and opportunities to be creative and adaptive. Several focused on the importance of prioritising self care and supervision.

Most queries related to safe working practices, social workers requesting information and guidance on safe working practices, particularly in relation to face to face work.

Increased technical support and IT equipment was the main area of support needed from employers, including secure video platform/technology.

Social workers asked that management acknowledge, recognise and value the work of social work.

## WORRIES

Social workers' main worry was about the impact of Covid-19 on children, families and foster carers. They also worried about health and safety, Covid-19 related changes to work practices and worried about the future impact on social work.

### Impact of Covid-19 on Children, Families and Foster Carers

Social workers worried about **vulnerable children and families**, with many specifically concerned about children exposed to risk or isolated in their home environments without access to their usual support networks, i.e. school.

*'I am really worried about children at home without daily face to face support. After they come into care many children talk about school or clubs being their safe place and they've lost that. I am also worried about how to ethically resume therapeutic work with children knowing that if the virus returns I'll have to end abruptly again. For children with trauma and loss I am worried about the impact of these abrupt endings, particularly if repeated'*

*'Children exposed to domestic violence. Stress in the home. No teachers to report in. No networks due to cocooning'*

*'Impact of restrictions on mental health, stability of placements, safety of children (I work with children in care).'*

Many worried about the disruption to **access arrangements**, concerns including virus transmission during access, the impact on children and families, reluctance of foster carers to facilitate access and conducting access safely.

*'Worried about parents, children & foster carers contracting Covid-19, during access visits.'*

*'Contact and access for children in care with parents where we have no certainty of their contacts and children are then returning to foster carers potentially transmitting virus.'*

*'Restrictions easing without clear guidance from Tusla on management of access. Resistance of foster carers to facilitating access'*

There was also worry about the impact of Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions on the **quality of communication and relationships** between social workers and service users.

*'Worried that remote working will be more common to the detriment of personal relationship with those we work with and support.'*

*'The breakdown of real personable communication between social workers and service users.'*

### **Health and Safety of Self and Others**

Social workers worried about their own health, some having concerns about maintaining social distancing or contracting Covid-19 on home visits. Some were concerned about their mental health or stress levels while working from home. Several said they worried about the health of their family and friends. Some worried about the health of professionals in general.

*'The potential of exposure to Covid-19 as access and home visits are established again.'*

*'Contracting virus and passing it on to others.'*

*'Ensuring safety of all our staff, children in care & foster parents along with ensuring safety when staff in child protection have to do home visits.'*

*'The health of family, friends and clients.'*

### **Changes to Work Practices**

There were a range of concerns about the consequences of working in new ways during Covid-19. For example, some worried about the quality of their assessments, missing important information and making mistakes. Worry about the lack of face to face or regular contact with service users was also highlighted in responses to this question.

*'Making assessments on situations & getting it wrong. Wrongly assessing the amount of pressure & stress parents are experiencing & underestimating how that might be impacting on their role as parents.'*

*'I work in fostering, assessing potential foster carers. We are doing assessment via Skype and I worry we are missing something by doing interviews this way.'*

*'Reducing face to face contact thereby overlooking potential risk.'*

*'Working in isolation and making a mistake.'*

## **Impact on Social Work**

Respondents worried about future issues which could impact upon social work. They worried about changes in frontline practice, an increase in workload, cutbacks, the response of the social work profession to the pandemic, job stability and staff burnout.

*'Where it will end, how will practice change, what we need to do going forward to adapt but protect the core values of our profession.'*

*'Planning for work to support social workers on the frontline over the next few months.'*

*'The amount of work that we will need to take on when services resume.'*

## **THE CHALLENGES**

Respondents were primarily concerned about the impact of lockdown restrictions on face to face contact and direct work with children and families and the resultant impact on relationships. Additional challenges identified were working from home, lack of organisational support and management of childcare.

### **Lack of Face to Face Contact & Direct Work**

A third referred to the challenges of not being able to meet in person with children and families. The absence of direct work impacted on assessments and made it challenging to maintain and build relationships or to engage with service users, particularly children.

*'I'm finding that it is difficult to keep up relationships with families and children. Some love to talk on the phone, some don't. So it's hard to monitor how well some families are doing.'*

*'Unable to meet with children, have never met three of the young people allocated to me.'*

*'Extremely challenging to do a GAL assessment. Whatsapp videos are no substitute for face-to-face contact.'*

### **Working from Home**

A quarter identified working from home/remote work as a challenge. Factors contributing to this included lack of resources/IT access, missing collegial support, while some found work/life balance difficult to manage.

*'Working from home mostly. Getting used to it was the challenge. I occasionally have worked from home in the past when I have a specific piece of work to do but this is different. Find it hard to separate work from home.'*

*'It is very difficult to work from home where there is no longer a clear separation between work and home, as well as the lack of natural connections with colleagues for support.'*

## **Lack of Organisational Support/Guidance and Direction**

Respondents reported challenges associated with what they perceived to be poor guidance, direction and support from management or a lack of guidance, direction and support. Examples given include lack of guidance on PPE and social distancing. A small number referred to the challenge of being micromanaged and dealing with the stress this created for them.

*'No clear guidance on use of PPE specifically face masks... Tusla guidance on access contradicts public health advice.'*

*'Being told not to do home visits except in an emergency, then constantly being asked how many I've completed. Management seem to be panicking about stats and don't really like us working from home. The latest is now filling in a work from home tracker, its stressful.'*

*'Poor support from management. Excessive levels of micromanaging leading to stress.'*

## **Managing Childcare**

Many identified managing childcare, home school and work responsibilities while working from home as a significant challenge.

*'Children at home, management not facilitating workers to take care of children unless taking AL.'*

*'Trying to juggle working online/phone with childcare and home-schooling.'*

## **EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE/KEY LEARNING**

Social workers identified a number of examples of worthwhile learning and positive practice developments that could be built on. These include advances in the use of technology in practice, prioritising contact and communication with service users, as well as examples of positive, supportive team practice and opportunities to be creative and adaptive. Several focused on the importance of self care and supervision.

### **Using Technology in Practice**

One third gave examples of how they now used technology in practice. Some found technology helpful to support professional meetings and communication while others gave examples of the benefits of using technology in their direct work with children, families and carers. The delivery of online training and the use of online resources was also considered beneficial.

*'New opportunities of video contact can be incorporated into everyday practice in future.'*

*'Zoom professional meetings can be efficient and helpful.'*

*'Sharing of useful research on social media around the challenges ahead for children in care is helpful.'*

### **Prioritising Communication and Contact with Service Users**

Examples given referred to key learning about communication and contact with service users and emphasised learning around the benefits of maintaining frequent contact with people. Several others said best practice in communicating with children and young people required use of new and creative approaches.

*'Regular check ins definitely help. I've noticed that the more you make an effort to chat to families the more they are comfortable talking to you. But you have to manage this without being invasive.'*

*'I have found some great ways to be playful onscreen. I have also sent caregivers videos or silly photos I think the children will like and in terms of feeling held in mind thus has been quite powerful and something I will continue.'*

### **Supportive Team and Interagency work**

Positive, supportive interagency and teamwork were given as examples of best practice. Some highlighted enhanced interagency co-operation tightly focused on meeting the needs of service users as examples of best practice while others highlighted key learning about the value of peer support from other social workers.

*'Interagency working has been at its best and the engagement of community and voluntary sectors in conjunction with statutory services has been amazing in ensuring that the needs of children and families are brought to the fore and met.'*

*'... communicating with co-workers to stay connected though apart.'*

*'Best practice example I can give is not about working with families but about how social workers on the ground are supporting colleagues at this difficult time.'*

### **Being Creative & Adaptive**

A number of responses referred to learning to adapt current and past work practices, developing new practices and the benefits of being creative or 'thinking outside the box'. Being creative and adaptive can also be considered as a cross-cutting theme in the responses to the question about best practice/key learning as this approach to practice was evident in many of the examples given.

*'Being creative is key to moving forward with your work. People quickly adapt to new ways of working so don't be afraid to try implement a new approach.'*

*'Have learned to really think outside the box as an individual social worker and as part of team - to be creative in our contact with our children in care.'*

*'We have adapted our fostering preparatory course to an online training. Our team has worked hard to ensure the training is informative, useful and fit for purpose. It has opened up other potential opportunities about how we conduct training post-Covid.'*

## **Prioritising Self Care & Supervision**

Several social workers identified paying attention to self care as example of best practice while others said ongoing use of supervision or reflective practice were among the key learnings they had experienced.

*'Importance of slower practice and how this can create space for reflective practice.'*

*'Regular breaks for tea or coffee to get up and moving. Turn off phone and computer at the end of the day. Take a full lunch break away from place you're working.'*

## **QUERIES ABOUT COVID-19 AND SOCIAL WORK**

The key queries relate to physical safety, the resumption of direct work, responses to the social aspects of Covid-19, impact on clients and impact on social work.

### **Physical Safety of Social Workers**

Most queries related to working safely. These queries included requests for information about use of PPE, plans to distribute PPE, risks of transmission of virus during course of work with children or in office settings and queries around how to conduct face to face contact safely.

*'What PPE should we wear doing home visits when you cannot guarantee social distancing and the hygiene in the house is unknown or questionable? Should we be using face visors instead of masks-less frightening for children?'*

*'Are there plans to distribute PPE for social workers and others conducting meetings with children and young people?'*

### **Resuming Direct Work**

Respondents had questions about when direct work with service users could resume. They also queried when and how home visits could safely resume.

*'How can I visit children, hear their voice, in their family home, in a safe but meaningful way while maintaining confidentiality?'*

### **Response to Social Aspects of Covid-19**

Social workers expressed concern about the social impact of Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions and outlined their concerns about how increased needs would be met. The absence of social work expertise in shaping planning and responses at national level was also raised.

*'The social aspect of Covid-19 must be now be focused in on as the medical perspective has been the focus understandably thus far but Covid-19 will and is having a significant social and economic impact and this needs to be examined now and services identified to meet these needs. Issues already identified in the original ACE Study by Felitte and Anda are the issues that Covid-19 has raised significantly, domestic violence, mental health, addiction issues, parental separation and childhood adversities.'*

*'Social Workers have the core skills to be able to work with the public in relation to this pandemic. Why are these skills not being fully utilised by the government?'*

### **Impact on Clients**

Respondents had queries about how the lack of face to face contact with clients and families was impacting. There were also queries about risks associated with the drop in referrals and whether measures were in place to support the mental health of service users.

*'Are there measures being put in place to deal with the fact that we are getting far fewer referrals even though the risk to children is increased?'*

### **Impact on Social Work**

Some had queries about the impact of the pandemic on social work.

*'I worry that some of the current practices of phone conferances will be expected to continue and be seen as cost effective and the importance of being in the presence of those we work with will be ignored.'*

*'How will this pandemic change the face of social work?'*

## **WHAT ONE THING COULD YOUR ORGANISATION DO TO BETTER SUPPORT YOUR WORK IN A LOCKDOWN SITUATION?**

Responses to this question can be grouped into three themes: technical and resource support, acknowledge and value social work and childcare.

### **Technical and Resource Support**

Increased technical support and IT equipment was the main area of support identified by social workers, some of whom referenced the need for a secure video platform/technology.

*'Give us technical support – access to laptops/internal database/internal shared. Very hard to work with families when we cant look back at previous notes/reports.'*

*'Improve IT access and skills.'*

*'Have a video platform that can be used internally and externally.'*



## Acknowledge and Value Social Work

Respondents asked that management acknowledge, recognise and value the work of social workers. Respondents also asked for increased guidance and updates from management about a range of issues relevant to their work. Some asked that management consider the impact of stress, fear and pressure on staff. Also requested was less emphasis on forms/tick box exercises/statistics/lists/trackers/micromanaging of social workers working from home as well as acknowledgement that productivity was impacted by changed working practices was required.

*'Management needs to acknowledge the work that is being doing by frontline social workers. This has not happened across the board.'*

*'Senior Management having more contact with workers on the ground to understand worries and fears social workers face having to do home visits. Don't think they quite understand the fear as they are not the ones having to do the visit.'*

*'Realise that staff too are under extreme stress - be more patient, realise that it is hard to be as productive as other times due to the limitations of movement, etc. due to Covid-19. Show respect to staff, show they are valued.'*

## Childcare

A small number of respondents requested support and acknowledgement of the challenges associated with childcare.

*'Be more flexible with working hours for people who have children at home.'*

*'I do not have childcare & so am trying to balance my job with my other job as parent of young children. It is extremely difficult & stressful.'*

## THE RESPONDENTS

39% of the total responses identified themselves as working in the field of Children and Families. Most chose the category of experienced social worker (48%), followed by managers (19%), independents (9%) and newly qualified social workers (9%).

| ANSWER CHOICES                | RESPONSES |    |
|-------------------------------|-----------|----|
| Student social worker         | 1.72%     | 1  |
| Newly qualified social worker | 8.62%     | 5  |
| Experienced social worker     | 48.28%    | 28 |
| Social work supervisor        | 6.90%     | 4  |
| Manager                       | 18.97%    | 11 |
| Academic                      | 1.72%     | 1  |
| Independent social worker     | 8.62%     | 5  |
| Other                         | 5.17%     | 3  |
| TOTAL                         |           | 58 |

At the time of data collection, 86% of respondents were working from home while the remainder worked between home and the office.

Most respondents were provided with laptop, mobile phones, software and guidance from their employer. The majority of respondents had access to a good wifi connection (72%), with just over half receiving wifi support from their employer. No respondent reported that their employer provided childcare.

### **Acknowledgements**

Funding for the **IASW Social Work During Covid-19 Survey** was provided by the Department of Children & Youth Affairs. Permission was received from the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to replicate and adapt their **Social work during Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Ongoing Survey**. Many thanks to both organisations for their support.

An advisory group was established to

1. Support and advise on data analysis
2. Review emerging themes and results
3. Advise on dissemination of key findings and results with a view to making relevant information available to key stakeholders

Many thanks to the members of the group for their generosity in sharing their time, expertise, advice and support. Their perspectives strengthened and enriched the survey at all stages of the research process. Members of the group were:

- Sarah Donnelly, School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, UCD
- Niamh Flanagan, Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University
- Vivian Geiran, School of Social Work and Social Policy, TCD and IASW Board Member

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