What Works for Children's Social Care

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CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A RAPID REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE IN RELATION TO REMOTE LEADERSHIP

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What Works *for* Children's Social Care

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and associated 'lockdown' of social and economic activity in the UK has created unprecedented challenges for child and family social workers – and for the families they work with. One key challenge for those in leadership roles is how best to support and manage their teams when working remotely.

Leaders in social work, including team managers, have a critically important part to play in the delivery of high-quality services for children and families. Providing effective leadership in social work requires a complicated and demanding set of skills. While there are some social work teams that work remotely as a matter-of-course (such as out-of-hours emergency duty teams), it is more common for teams to share office space. This suggests that for many social work leaders, if not all, the need to work remotely while still supporting and overseeing the work of their teams, is a new challenge. In this report, we consider the results of a rapid review of the evidence and the facilitators and barriers for effective remote leadership.

Methodology

We used a rapid review approach to find relevant literature. In order that the report could be published within a short timeframe, we restricted our search to English-language articles published within the past ten years and accessible via Cardiff University library. Articles were screened for inclusion / exclusion by single researchers and were not analysed for quality of evidence or risk of bias. We included 18 studies in total.

Key findings

We found a limited amount of relevant literature that met our inclusion criteria, none of which was published directly in relation to social work leadership or practice. All of the studies we did include relate to remote leadership in otherwise normal working circumstances, and not because of a relatively sudden and widespread social and economic change. We identified five facilitators of effective remote leadership:

1. **Leadership style** – leaders need to be flexible, and provide task-oriented and relationship-based support;
2. **Communication** – needs to be regular and allow for the sharing of ideas;
3. **Team organisation** – leaders need to pay special attention to team coordination and set specific goals for team members;
4. **Team cohesion** – leaders need to be visible to all team members and facilitate (non-mandatory) social as well as work-related activities;
5. **Focus on team performance** – leaders need to set clear goals, provide regular feedback and allow more time and flexibility around task-completion.

And four barriers:

1. **Diluted and unequal leadership** – the impact of the leader is likely to be diluted and previous methods of working may not be as effective, the demands of remote leadership may not be felt equally by female and male leaders;
2. **Communication** – there will be an absence of opportunities for informal discussions;
3. **Team cohesion** – conflict or fault-lines between team members may emerge;
4. **Team performance** – individuals will find it harder to collaborate and overall team performance may be less productive than normal.

BACKGROUND

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and associated 'lockdown' of social and economic activity in the UK has created unprecedented challenges for child and family social workers – and for the families they work with. One key challenge for those in leadership roles is how best to support and manage their teams when working remotely.

Leaders in social work, including team managers, have a critically important part to play in the delivery of high-quality services for children and families. Providing effective leadership in social work requires a complicated and demanding set of skills. Leaders at every level have a shared responsibility for creating and maintaining systems that support excellent practice, for developing excellent practitioners and for effective decision-making and quality assurance (Department for Education 2018a). Those closer to practice are also responsible for providing emotional support for practitioners, overseeing casework, and ensuring purposeful, confident, and above all helpful services for families (Department for Education 2018b). Doing these things while having to maintain social distancing, and relying on remote and virtual forms of communication, is likely to create additional challenges.

While there are some social work teams that work remotely as a matter-of-course (such as out of hours emergency duty teams), it is more common for teams to share office space. As the debate about hot-desking has shown (Jeyasingham 2016), many social workers feel strongly that being able to work in physical proximity with their colleagues and their supervisors and managers is a necessary part of an effective practice system. The aim of this review has been to identify lessons from the existing literature on remote leadership and consider what help these could provide for social work leaders who have suddenly found themselves having to support their teams remotely.

What is remote leadership?

There are several different terms found in the literature - including remote leadership, virtual leadership and dispersed leadership – all of which describe essentially the same thing: the supervision, management and leadership of teams and team members who work across dispersed physical spaces. Typically, the phrase is used to describe teams who work in a physically dispersed way as a matter of course and the growing availability of electronic forms of communication has made such teams more and more common (Powell et al. 2004). It is much more unusual, as in the current Covid-19 pandemic, for teams used to working in physically proximity to be suddenly dispersed.

RAPID REVIEW

The following sections outline the research questions we addressed, the methods we used to find and analyse relevant literature, and the results of the review. The overall approach of a rapid review was selected in order that the findings could be published as quickly as possible.

Research questions

The research questions are deliberately broad in scope, as our preliminary searches indicated that the extent of the relevant literature is quite limited. The questions we addressed are as follows:

1. What helps facilitate the provision of effective remote leadership?
2. What are the barriers to the provision of effective remote leadership?

Literature search

We undertook a search of the literature between 11th and 15th May, using two databases – ASSIA and Sociological Abstracts. (See appendix 1 for details of the search strategy). As preliminary searches indicated a general absence of relevant literature from the field of social work directly, our inclusion criteria (see below) were broadened to include any field of practice or business. After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts were reviewed by a single researcher. Studies that appeared to meet the eligibility criteria were obtained in full and reviewed again by a single researcher. The reference lists of these studies were examined for any additional references not identified via the initial search. Any additional eligible studies were included at this stage, regardless of their publication date. Data extraction was completed by a single researcher. The data extraction form covered items such as: the study author, publication date, aim of the study, methods used, sample size, sample selection process, data analysis approach, main findings, and the authors' recommendations for practice.

- **Inclusion criteria**
  - English-language full-text publications, accessible via Cardiff University
  - Journal articles published between 1st January 2010 and 10th May 2020
  - Case studies, observational studies, trials, systematic or other types of reviews and meta-analyses
  - Purpose of the article is to describe or provide evidence in relation to the provision of effective remote leadership
  - From any field of practice or business
- **Exclusion criteria**
  - Articles focused on leadership but not remote leadership
  - Articles focused on remote working but not remote leadership
  - Discussion or purely theoretical articles
- **Outcomes of interest**
  - Methods used to help in the provision of effective remote leadership
  - Facilitators and barriers to the provision of
  - effective remote leadership

Results

Figure 1 shows a flow diagram of the search results and how exclusion criteria were applied at the different stages. Table 1 shows an overview of the 18 studies included in the final review.

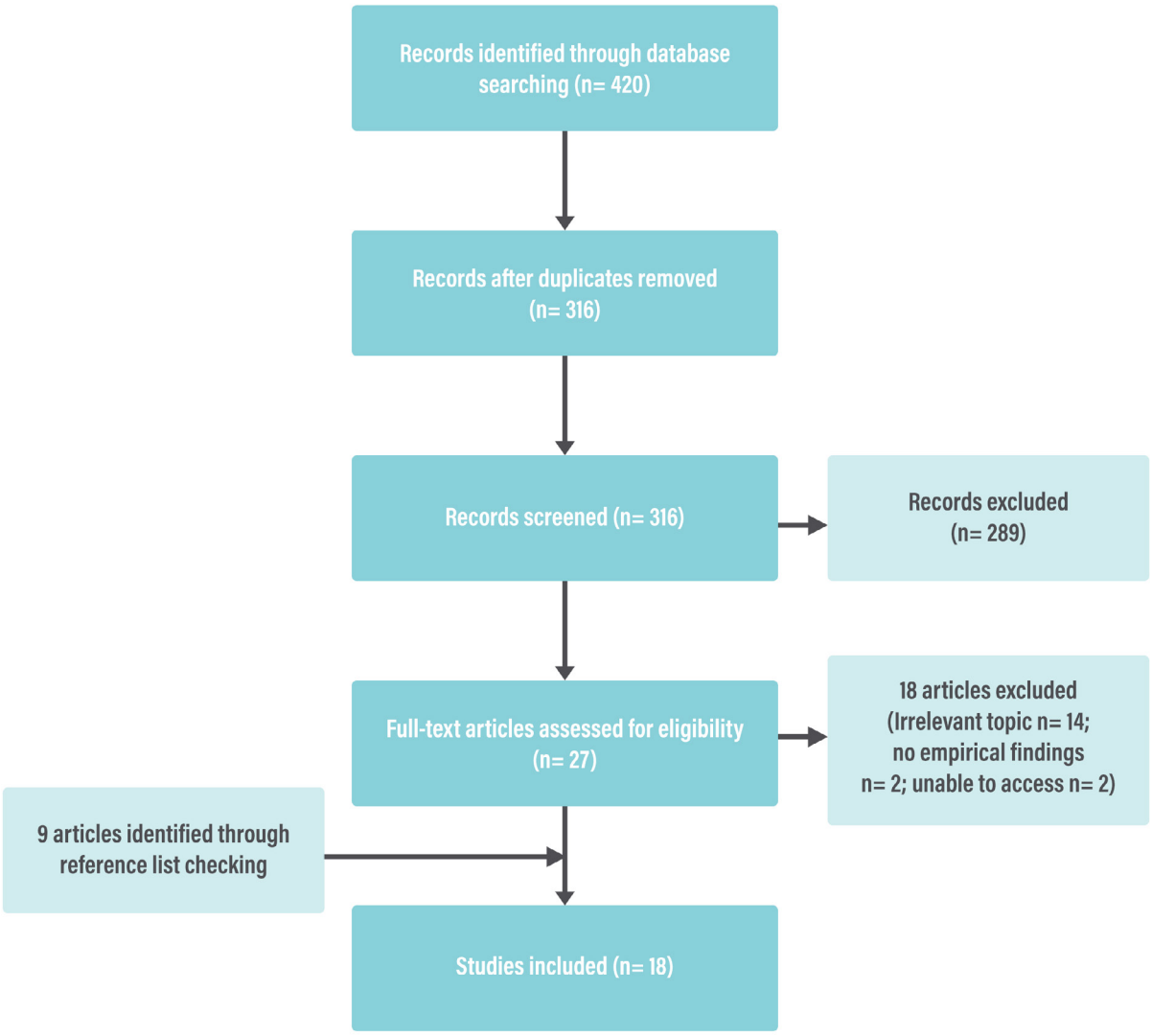

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the rapid review (Moher et al. 2009)

Table 1: Overview of the 18 studies included in the rapid review

Paper	Setting	Focus	Methodology and methods	Sample	What helps facilitate effective remote leadership?	What are the barriers to effective remote leadership?
(Al-Ani et al. 2011)	Business (USA)	The experience of leadership in distributed teams of employees in a large private company	Qualitative, interviews and survey	Team members (n=16)	Initial face-to-face meetings; using technology to avoid information loss; sharing ideas between team members; trust between leaders and team members and between team members	Absence of 'hall-way' conversations; less frequent communication; inefficient means of communication
(Chamakiotis and Panteli 2017)	Business and Academia (UK)	To understand creativity in virtual project teams and consider the role of leadership in supporting creativity	Qualitative, focus groups, interviews, observations, review of documents	Team members (n=49)	Experienced leaders able to motivate and guide team members; good organisation and coordination; good communication; relevant technical skills	
(Eisenberg et al. 2019)	Business (USA)	To explore the relationship between transformational leadership styles, communication, performance and dispersion	Quantitative, standardised measures via a survey	Team members and company stakeholders (n=543)	Good communication; team members able to regulate own performance	Reduced opportunities to develop trusting relationships; inability to collaborate concurrently on work; inability to share ideas; influence of effective leaders is diluted; reduced interactional cues via electronic communication; less efficient and less frequent communication

(Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. 2018)	Social work research (Canada)	To explore strategies used by a dispersed research team ensure effective working	Qualitative, interviews and focus groups (to validate findings)	Team members (n=7)	Achieving a balance between affective and task-focused leadership; enabling team members to socialise; regular virtual meetings; cross-fertilisation of ideas; setting specific roles within the team	
(Gilson et al. 2015)	Business (international)	To synthesize ten years of research on virtual teams	Narrative, literature review	243 articles	Transformational leadership style	Diluted relationship between leadership and performance
(Hambley et al. 2007)	Academia (Canada)	To investigate the effects of transformational and transactional leadership styles on team interaction styles and outcomes	Quantitative, structured problem-solving task	Undergraduate students (n=228)	Transformational and transactional leadership styles can be equally effective	
(Han and Beyerlein 2016)	Business and Academia (international)	To examine the factors that affect remote and culturally diverse team processes and performance	Narrative, literature review	60 articles	Clear goals for team members; regular feedback on performance; activities to maintain team identity and coherence	
(Hertel et al. 2005)	Business (international)	To summarize empirical research in relation to remote management, provide a conceptual model and make recommendations for practice	Narrative, literature review	Not specified	Good quality goal setting; regular feedback on performance; clarified team roles and goals; efficient communication; opportunities for informal communication and inter-dependence; training for the specific challenges of remote teamwork	

(Hoch and Kozlowski 2014)	Business (USA)	To compare hierarchical leadership and shared team leadership in relation to team performance	Quantitative, questionnaires and standardised measures	Team members and team leaders (n=565)	Fair and reliable reward systems; transparent communication and information management; shared rather than hierarchical leadership rather; allowing for time and providing training to help meet the requirements of remote working	
(Keijser et al. 2016)	Healthcare (international)	To explore how knowledge on virtual leadership has permeated into the field of healthcare	Narrative, literature review	44 articles	Good communication; maintaining team norms; leaders establishing a virtual presence	
(Kirkman et al. 2002)	Business (Canada and USA)	To identify challenges for virtual teams and organisational coping strategies	Qualitative, interviews	Team members (n=58), team leaders (n=11), divisional vice presidents (n=6) and executive vice president (n=1)	Enabling trust; training in remote team leadership; an environment of inclusiveness and involvement; recruitment methods that identify staff with appropriate interpersonal skills; regular feedback	Previous methods of trust-building may not work remotely; recruiting people with the right skills can be difficult; assessment and professional development is more limited
(Liao 2017)	Business (international)	To propose a model of leadership in virtual teams	Narrative, literature review	Not specified	Task orientated leadership; relationship-oriented interactions	Relationship building is less organic and takes more time; building trust, managing conflict and facilitating collaboration takes more time and more input from leaders

(Malhotra et al. 2007)	Business (USA)	To identify effective leadership practices in virtual teams	Mixed methods, interviews and survey	Team members (n= 269) and team leaders (n=54)	Establish and maintain trust; ensure diversity in the team is appreciated and leveraged; manage the remote work cycle and have regular meetings; monitor team progress; enhance the visibility of the team and its members; ensure individuals participate in virtual team events	
(Munir et al. 2016)	Pharmacology (Pakistan)	To explore workplace isolation in pharma-ceutical companies	Quantitative, survey	Team members (n=227)	Inter-personal trust, worker self-efficacy and transformational leadership helps reduce team isolation	
(Ocker et al. 2011)	Business (USA)	To explore virtual team dynamics and whether any could be considered more or less effective	Primarily qualitative, reflective diaries and observations	Work placement students (n=71)	Emergent or distributive approaches to leadership	Fault lines emerging between sub-groups and / or individuals
(Purvanova and Bono 2009)	Academia (USA)	To explore transform-ational leadership styles in virtual and face-to-face teams	Quantitative, questionnaires	Undergraduate students (n=272)	Transformational leadership styles can aid in task performance and enhance the worker's experience	
(Rafnsdóttir and Júlíusdóttir 2018)	Business (Iceland)	To explore how the nature of virtual work impacts differently on male and female leaders	Qualitative, interviews	Senior leaders (n=32)		Unequal work-home life balance between male and female leaders
(Zimmermann et al. 2008)	Business (Germany, the Netherlands, UK and USA)	To compare task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership behaviours in virtual and face-to-face settings	Quantitative, survey	Team members (n=412)	Effective communication; stimulate information sharing; promote group identification; task-oriented leadership	Virtual communication lacks social and auditory cues; challenging to promote group identification

DISCUSSION

The studies included in this review have primarily focused on remote leadership in either business or academic settings. None of the studies reported on remote leadership specifically in relation to social work practice, although one did consider remote leadership in healthcare. All of the studies reported on teams that work remotely (or virtually) as a matter-of-course, rather than in response to a sudden change in circumstances.

The methodologies used in the studies were a mixture of qualitative (n=6) and quantitative (n=6). The most common methods were interviews and surveys or questionnaires, although across all of the studies a wide range of methods were used including focus groups, observations, document reviews, reflective diaries, introspective accounts and standardised measures. A number of studies (n=5) presented reviews of the literature and one used mixed methods.

Barriers to effective remote leadership

Eight of the studies also identified several barriers to the provision of effective remote leadership. These can be grouped together as follows:

1. Diluted and unequal leadership
2. Communication
3. Team cohesion, *and*
4. Team performance

In relation to *diluted* and *unequal leadership*, five of the studies identified a number of barriers. Prime among these is that the influence of effective leaders is likely to be diluted when working remotely. Even leaders who have previously been very effective at creating cohesive teams, setting a clear vision and motivating for high levels of performance may struggle to achieve the same results when working remotely. Previously effective methods may not work as well or at all when applied remotely. This means that leaders working remotely will need to spend more time and have a greater level of input to maintain trust, manage conflicts and facilitate collaboration. One study found that the demands of remote leadership fall unequally on male and female leaders, with female leaders having to work harder to meet the demands of work and family life compared to male leaders (Rafnsdóttir and Júlíusdóttir 2018).

Barriers to effective *communication*, including a lack of opportunity for informal or 'hallway' conversations, were identified in three of the studies. This greater difficulty to engage in quick, informal and responsive discussions limits the way in which ideas and information can circulate through the team. Communication of all kinds is likely to happen less frequently and to be more inefficient. Virtual communication tools also tend to reduce the availability of interactional and social cues, making them not only less useful than face-to-face discussions but also more stressful and harder work for those involved.

Four of the studies identified barriers in relation to *team cohesion*, as there are often fewer opportunities to develop and maintain trusting relationships. Conflicts or fault-lines can arise more often between sub-groups or individuals within the team and when these do occur, they are harder for leaders to notice and address. Overall, it is harder to maintain a sense of team unity when individuals are working physically separated from one another.

Finally, four studies noted how it can be a challenge to maintain expected levels of *team performance* when relying on remote leadership. It is harder for individuals to collaborate together on shared tasks, and more difficult to assess the

performance of each individual. Professional development is also harder to do remotely.

Facilitators of effective remote leadership

Although none of the studies identified clear methods for the provision of effective remote leadership, nevertheless they did, in all but one case, identify facilitators of it. These can be grouped together as follows:

1. Leadership style
2. Communication
3. Team organisation
4. Team cohesion, *and*
5. Focus on team performance

In relation to *leadership style*, ten of the studies identified either transformational, transactional or shared styles as being more effective than hierarchal leadership (an approach based on clear lines of accountability and chains of command). A number of these studies also recommended a mixture of task-oriented and relationship-based leadership. Transformational leadership describes an approach in which the leader works with the team to identify any necessary changes and then creates a vision of what those changes will achieve to help guide team members through inspirational motivation (Odumeru and Ogbonna 2013). Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is a more short-term focused approach, in which leaders use close supervision and performance review to guide the activities of team members (ibid). Task-oriented leaders are similarly focused on relatively short-term task completion, in order to ensure deadlines are met and high standards of work upheld (Forsyth 2011). Relationship-based leadership involves a focus on the well-being of team members (ibid). Finally, shared leadership describes a way of working in which different aspects of leadership are performed by different members of the team (ibid). Taken together, these studies suggest that a range of different leadership styles can be effective when working remotely, and there is not one style that works in all situations. It also suggests that leaders themselves need to be flexible, knowing when to move between different leadership styles, and ensuring that they do not become too wedded to only one way of working. From a theory development perspective, it might also suggest that the concept of leadership styles needs further work before it can be applied more usefully for empirical work.

For *communication*, six of the studies identified ways in which it might be done more effectively. At a basic level, effective leaders when working remotely will ensure there is regular communication between themselves and team members, as well as among team members. This might include regular virtual meetings, as well as some infrequent face-to-face meetings if and when this becomes possible. As well as meetings, effective remote leadership means enabling team members to share ideas with one another, stimulating information sharing and creating opportunities for informal communication as well.

In three of the studies, facilitators related to *team organisation* were identified. Remote working teams need to pay special attention to coordination between different team members. Leaders also need to think about setting specific roles and goals for team members and clarifying where these are different as a result of working remotely compared to working physically together.

In order to ensure *team cohesion*, seven of the studies identify facilitators to help. These facilitators can be grouped into two areas – activities to maintain team identity and ensuring visibility of the leader. While team members should not be mandated to engage in social activities, it is important for the leader to encourage as many team members as possible to get involved, while also ensuring that these activities are as accessible as possible for the whole team. These activities can also help maintain trust between leaders and team members and between team members themselves. The visibility of the leader was also considered to be important, especially when this could not be achieved via physical presence.

Finally, three of the studies described how a focus on *team performance* can be facilitated by setting clear goals, giving regular feedback, allowing more time and providing specific training for tasks that have changed as a result of remote working, and promoting worker self-efficacy.

Implications for remote leadership in social work

Leadership in social work has some similarities with leadership in other contexts, including the need to oversee the work of team members, to help individuals develop their skills and to maintain a sense of shared endeavour. Yet social work leadership also has some unique qualities, including the need to help manage risk and to ensure decisions are made not only legally but ethically. As the studies included in this review were not specific to social work, it is unsurprising to note that the findings may apply more to those shared issues of leadership than they do to specific questions of social work leadership.

Nevertheless, there are some implications for social work leaders. Many will already be familiar with the *provision* of relationship-based support, alongside a focus on task completion and work performance. Yet it has long been a truism in social work that leaders themselves need support, as much as they need to provide it for others – and now, during the pandemic, even more so. One practical way of providing such support, from and between team members, is to think about the faciliatory factor of shared leadership and setting clear roles. Some teams will already have specific roles for team members, for example 'practice champions' in relation to the authority's practice model and senior social workers in supervisory or supportive roles for newly qualified practitioners or to help with particular kinds of work. If not, then the suggestion for team members to take on these kinds of roles would not only help with individual development but can also mean that shared elements of leadership can be utilised. New and additional roles might be needed in relation to remote-working. Being able to debrief informally with colleagues after a difficult home visit or meeting is an important outlet for many workers. Team leaders are adept at fulfilling this role but cannot do so for everyone all of the time when co-working, let alone while working remotely. Enabling workers to 'buddy-up' with one another to offer a debrief or an informal catch-up when needed, particularly where there might be new or recently joined members of the team, will help those individuals but also help share the work of leadership between team members who are ready to take on such responsibilities. Where such opportunities have been available, they are valued by the workers involved (Cook and Zschomler, 2020). Some workers have reported feeling *more supported* than usual, as a result of using alternative means of communication, particularly when leaders have enabled them to work flexibly, in order to balance work and caring responsibilities (ibid).

The idea of setting clear goals and allowing more time for particular tasks is also an important one for social work. As others are finding (Featherstone and Bowyer, 2020), while the Covid-19 pandemic has brought with it a set of serious and significant problems for many people and organisations, it also offers the opportunity to reflect on the purpose of practice activities. Clear goals for team members can be 'reset' in light of the pandemic, following renewed discussions about what really matters for the children and families being worked with. This no doubt will be of benefit to many, but can also help reassure workers that previous expectations for task completion need not remain exactly as before, albeit legal obligations and the key principles of ethical practice are a constant.

Limitations

The primary limitation is that we conducted a rapid rather than a systematic search of the literature. This increases the likelihood that we did not locate every relevant study. We restricted our search to English-language articles published in the past decade and accessible via Cardiff University library. We also searched in only two databases and did not evaluate the studies for quality of evidence or risk of bias. In addition,

most of the studies we identified for this review relate to fields of work quite different from social work. And none of them considered the provision of remote leadership in the midst of sudden and far-reaching – if hopefully short-lived – societal change. Screening of the studies we did locate was generally completed by a researcher working individually, rather than by a team of researchers working together. This increases the likelihood that screening decisions were subject to individual-level bias. More broadly, all of the studies included in the review were undertaken when working together was the norm, with remote work as the exception. The current situation is of course very different, with remote working for all (where possible) having been mandated by central government.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a limited formal evidence-base for leaders in social work to draw upon when considering how best to support and manage remote-working teams. Should remote working become a more established feature of social work in years to come, then a specific research focus on the provision of remote leadership in social work could be very helpful – particularly because many leaders and managers in social work will now have had experience of working remotely and will no doubt have developed and utilised many different methods and strategies, some of which they may have found more effective than others. In appendix 2, we have included a checklist for leaders to use in relation to their own teams to help assess the extent to which the facilitators and barriers identified via this review may be present or absent.

It is clear that remote working presents particular challenges for leaders (as it does for team members) and there are some indications from the literature about some facilitators and barriers to be aware of. What we need (and there is evidence of this already happening from the social work sector in England) is for leaders to creatively embrace these challenges and to develop new ways of re-creating in particular the informal elements of relationships that typically exist across physically co-located organisations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Search strategies

The following key terms were used in the database search:

- (leader*) AND
- (remote OR distant* OR virtual OR dispersed)

The results were limited to scholarly journal articles available in English language and published between 1st January 2010 and 10th May 2020.

ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts) contains records from over 500 journals across 19 different countries. It provides comprehensive coverage of disciplines including health, social sciences, psychology, sociology, politics, race relations and education.

Sociological Abstracts provides access to the international literature of sociology, including areas such as social work, social policy, and human services.

Appendix 2: Checklist for facilitators and barriers in practice

As a non-validated instrument, this checklist can be used flexibly in whatever way best suits the needs of your team or organisation. However, we would suggest the following steps:

1. Consider each item descriptor and the best source of evidence for them. For most, this will be obtained by talking to team members and asking about their experiences – this could be done in supervision or as part of a team meeting. For some of the more specific items, such as regular and well-attended meetings, evidence could also be obtained by simply checking how often meetings are happening and noting whether they are well-attended.
2. Under the column headings of present, somewhat present and not present, include a very brief summary of the feedback provided by team members. If everyone in the team (or a significant majority) agree with the descriptor, this should count as 'present'. If everyone in the team (or a significant minority) disagree, this should count as 'not present'. If there is mixed feedback, this should count as 'somewhat present'.
3. You do not need to write something about every specific descriptor. It may be that only some of them are relevant to your team. However, you should aim to include at least one or two specific items from each theme.
4. Once you have completed the checklist, it can be shared with the team, so that the findings are made transparent. Depending on the nature of the feedback, it may also be useful as the basis for a whole-team or management-level discussion about how best to respond and any actions that you might need to take.

Facilitators		*To what extent is this facilitator present for your team?*		
Theme	**Specific descriptor**	**Present**	**Somewhat present**	**Not present**
Leadership style	Leader is able to motivate and guide the work of team members			
	Striking a balance between task-focused and relational leadership			
	Leader has established a virtual presence with team members			
	Team members able to share in leadership functions			
Communication	Ideas are shared between team members			
	Meetings are regular			
	Meetings are well-attended by all team members			
	Team members have opportunities for informal communication			
Organisation	Team members are clear about their roles and goals in light of remote working			
	Team members are able to coordinate work with each other and with leaders			

Performance	Team members are able to regulate their own performance			
	Team members have clear goals			
	Team members receive regular feedback on their work			
	Team members have sufficient time to complete their work			
	Team members display high levels of self-efficacy			
	Leader is able to monitor team progress and performance			
Cohesion	Team members feel a sense of team identity			
	All team members are involved in team activities			
	Team members trust each other and their leaders			
	Team activities are organised and accessible for all			

Barriers		To what extent is this barrier present for your team?		
Theme	Specific descriptor	Very present	Somewhat present	Not present
Leadership	Previously effective leaders are less able to positively influence the team			
	The balance of work is not gender neutral			
	Leaders have insufficient time to help manage conflicts and facilitate collaborative working			
Communication	Team members have insufficient opportunity for informal communication			
	Ideas are not being shared between team members			
	Communication is inefficient and more stressful			
	Team members are not communicating frequently			
Performance	Team members are not able to work together			
	Leader is not able to oversee the work of the team effectively			
	Professional development has stalled			
Cohesion	Team members cannot maintain trusting relationships			
	Conflicts are emerging between sub-groups or individuals			
	The team is now lacking a sense of identity			

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