

COVID-19

Covid response - an evidence review of new practice

Interim report

December 2020





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About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) have conducted a rapid review of the evidence of "what works" relating to practice adaptations in children's services in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying social distancing measures. The aim of this report is to gather what we can learn from existing evidence about how to deliver such practice well, to feed into the Department for Education's decision-making on supporting system response and system recovery.

We first summarise the challenges experienced by children's services during Covid-19 and the innovative practice developed in response to those challenges. We focus the rapid review of the evidence on adaptations to practice in response to challenges which are ongoing or which are more likely to occur again so that the evidence continues to be useful to children's services as they continue their response to Covid-19 and move into recovery. Specifically, we focus on:

- Safeguarding children from afar (virtual / digital service delivery)
- Supporting vulnerable children to have an education
- Handling sudden and unpredictable shocks to the social work workforce.

Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, the existing evidence base is small (but rapidly growing) and so we draw on evidence from analogous contexts. We review both academic literature and grey literature on the websites of organisations supporting vulnerable children and young people.

We find that:

- There is substantial variation in the extent to which local authorities have substituted face-to-face meetings and home visits for virtual visits.
- Extensive use of "RAG" (Red, Amber, Green) ratings of risks and protective factors have supported children's services in their prioritisation of cases and their decisions as to which children and young people required home visits.
- Although vulnerable children and young people were eligible to attend school in the first national lockdown, attendance was poor, and some of the work supporting children's and young people's education has involved working closely with schools to encourage attendance.
- With a lack of visibility to universal services such as school, social workers and family support workers are concerned about hidden and emerging harms.
- Practitioners have been particularly concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of care leavers.



- The shocks to the workforce were not as bad as initially feared, and the anticipated spike in referrals to statutory children’s services as children and young people returned to school has not (yet) materialised.
- In some cases, the shared challenge and uncertainty of the pandemic have acted as a leveller between families and practitioners.

In the Discussion chapter, we pick out key learnings from the adaptations to practice by children’s services in the creation of a “new normal” as children’s services continue their response and move towards system recovery:

- 1) The circumstances under which it is possible to support children and young people well from afar
- 2) A renewed focus on offering practical and material support to families (compared with a focus on protection from risk)
- 3) The positive examples of multi-agency working to safeguard children
- 4) A blended approach to face-to-face and virtual working.



Covid response - an evidence review of new practice

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) are partnering to conduct research looking at how local authorities and children's trusts are responding to Covid-19 in their provision of services to at risk children and young people. The project overall aims to develop an understanding of the challenges to delivering early help and children's social care during a pandemic, how practice has changed to accommodate such challenges and what we can learn from existing evidence about how to deliver such practice well. The project also seeks to understand how best to disseminate innovative practice and to support the inclusion of existing and emerging evidence in practice innovations.

This interim report aims to:

- Provide a summary of challenges experienced by children's services during Covid-19
- Provide a summary of innovative practice responding to such challenges
- Conduct a rapid review of the evidence of a subsample of such innovative practice.

Methodology

What are the challenges and how has practice changed to respond?

To understand the challenges experienced by children's services during Covid-19 and practice changes in response to such challenges, we reviewed several sources:

- 32 semi-structured qualitative interviews with heads of early help services, lead practitioners, and head teachers, conducted by EIF together with the charity Action for Children between March and May 2020¹
- A review of the literature on virtual and digital delivery of services by EIF²
- Open text responses to WWCSC social worker polls
- Conversations with leaders from 15+ organisations (children's services and voluntary sector organisations) on WWCSC Talks (<https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/whats-new/podcasts/>) and webinars (<https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>)
- EIF webinars

¹ Wilson, H. & Waddell, S. (June 2020). *Covid-19 and early intervention: Understanding the impact, preparing for recovery*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-understanding-the-impact-preparing-for-recovery>

² Martin, J. McBride, T., Masterman, T., Pote, I., Mokhtar, N., Oprea, E. & Sorgenfrei, M. (April 2020). *Covid-19 and early intervention: Evidence, challenges and risks relating to virtual and digital delivery*. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-evidence-challenges-and-risks-relating-to-virtual-and-digital-delivery>



- The Department for Education’s practice database, collected from conversations with local authorities and children’s trusts
- Research by organisations supporting vulnerable children and young people.

As it was important to provide a rapid response, we summarised the information available instead of undertaking formal thematic analysis. This meant that the process was less exhaustive but we still followed a systematic process. The summarisation process involved listening to or reading material, and identifying information relevant to two research questions:

- What challenges have children’s services experienced during Covid-19?
- How have children’s services changed their practice in response to Covid-19?

What can we learn from existing evidence about how to deliver such practice well?

Having identified key challenges and common practice changes, we focused further research on best practice responses to a subset of these challenges. To inform system recovery, it is important that this work be forward-looking and so we focused on key challenges that may be persistent or may re-occur soon. These are:

- Safeguarding children who are not in contact with professionals as much as normal
- The continued education of vulnerable children
- Sudden and unpredictable shocks to the social work labour force.

We reviewed both the academic and grey literature on the websites of organisations supporting vulnerable children and young people for best practice relating to these challenges. The review of academic literature involved Google Scholar searches according to pre-defined search strings and filtering of articles by title. Due to the need for a rapid review, we do not expect to have covered all the relevant literature but to draw attention to resources which may be helpful. This report should not be read as a definitive answer as to whether such practice changes “work” - most of these changes will not have been formally evaluated - but as providing insights into when these new practices are likely to work better. Due to the unprecedented nature of the situation, we drew evidence from analogous contexts, for example, to examine the digital delivery of children’s services, we reviewed the evidence of digital service delivery to remote communities and drew on evidence from online counselling. The grey literature has the advantage of being very up-to-date; however, please note that due to the speed at which organisations wanted feedback sample sizes are small and samples are most frequently convenience samples and unlikely to be representative of their target population. Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from triangulating between these pieces of evidence. Please see the list of organisations in the Appendix. We have also provided links to practice guides where we considered that these would be useful to practitioners in their entirety.



What challenges have children's services experienced during Covid-19 and how have children's services changed their practice in response to Covid-19?

Safeguarding children from afar

The Challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to substantial changes in the context of children and families' lives and social work practice in England.

During 2020 the government put in place a national lockdown (23rd March - 4th July), local lockdowns (July - October), a tiered system of local lockdowns (October - 2nd November), a subsequent national lockdown (2nd November - 2nd December) and a tiered system of local lockdowns (2nd December onwards), during which the public were instructed to stay at home except for very limited purposes. In the first national lockdown, children stopped attending school, families were spending much more time together than before, often in small spaces and under heightened conditions of anxiety due to the uncertainty, disrupted routines, and concerns over their health and their financial security.

The number of calls to Childline about domestic abuse increased by 32% since the beginning of lockdown,³ and Refuge saw a 950% increase in the number of visits to their website (where women can request a callback at a safe time) compared with pre-lockdown levels.⁴ Analysis from the Royal College of Psychiatry suggests that over 8.4 million people were drinking at higher risk in September 2020 compared with 4.8 million in February 2020 and statistics from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System suggest that drug use in April 2020 was 20% higher than April 2019.⁵ The incidence of serious injury due to child abuse and neglect is up by a fifth on the same period last year,⁶ while NHS survey data has shown around a 5% increase in possible mental health disorders among children between 2017 and 2020.⁷

³ *Calls about domestic abuse highest on record following lockdown increase.* (10th June 2020). NSPCC. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2020/Calls-about-domestic-abuse-highest-on-record-following-lockdown-increase/>

⁴ *Refuge reports further increase in demand for its National Domestic Abuse Helpline services during lockdown.* (27th May 2020). Refuge. <https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-reports-further-increase-in-demand-for-its-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-services-during-lockdown/>

⁵ *Addiction services not equipped to treat the 8 million people drinking at high risk during pandemic, warns Royal College.* Royal College of Psychiatrists. (14 September 2020). <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2020/09/14/addiction-services-not-equipped-to-treat-the-8-million-people-drinking-at-high-risk-during-pandemic-warns-royal-college>

⁶ Amanda Spielman at NCASC 2020. OFSTED. (6th November 2020). <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/amanda-spielman-at-ncasc-2020>

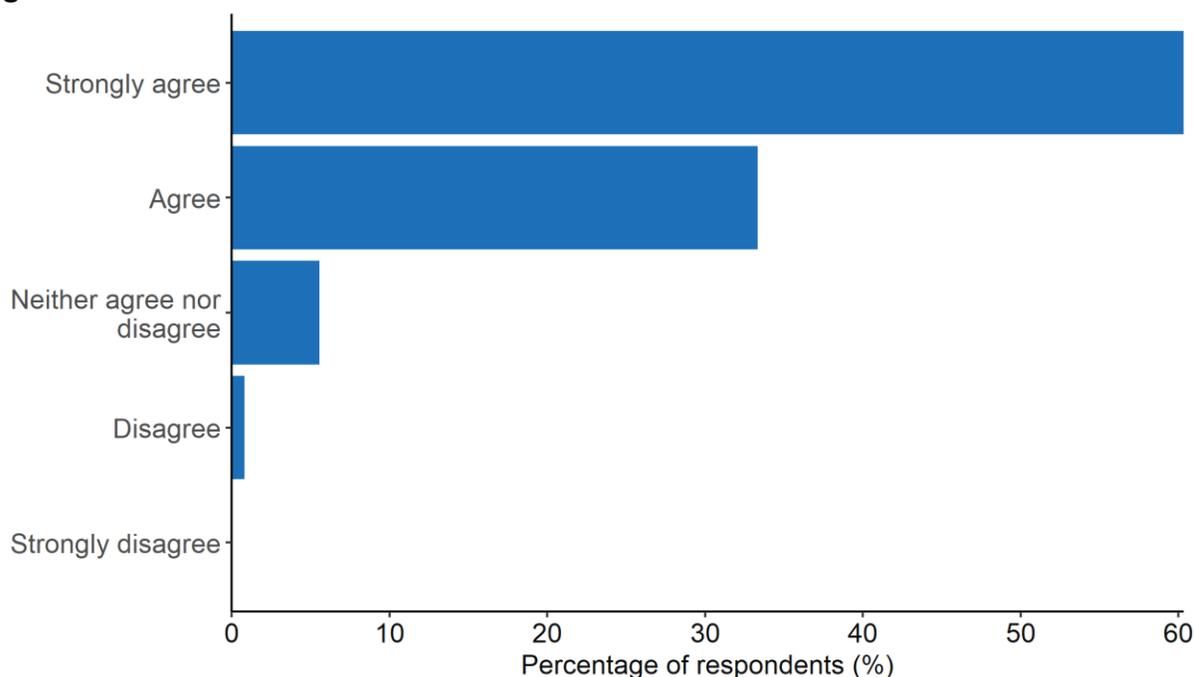
⁷ *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey.* NHS. (22nd October 2020). <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>



Restrictions on travel and social mixing meant contact with those outside the household changed substantially, affecting contact with birth families, a parent not living with the child and the families of children looked after under voluntary care orders because of their disability. Practical support with childcare from friends and family was also severely reduced.

The combination of increased risks, reduced support and less visibility of children to professionals has caused concern amongst practitioners about 'hidden harms'. 93% of respondents in the WWCS April 2020 poll agreed or strongly agreed that children and young people will be at a higher level of risk of abuse or neglect at this time.

Children and young people will be at a higher level of risk of abuse or neglect at this time?



Date: April 2020
Number of respondents: 126
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

From the end of April 2020 until the beginning of October 2020 (the latest available data), referrals to children’s services were lower than the three-year average of the same week for all fortnightly Vulnerable Children and Young People’s survey waves except in August.⁸ Local authorities predicted (in open text responses in the VCYP’s survey, the WWCS social worker panel and qualitative work by EIF⁹) that referrals to children’s services would vastly increase as children

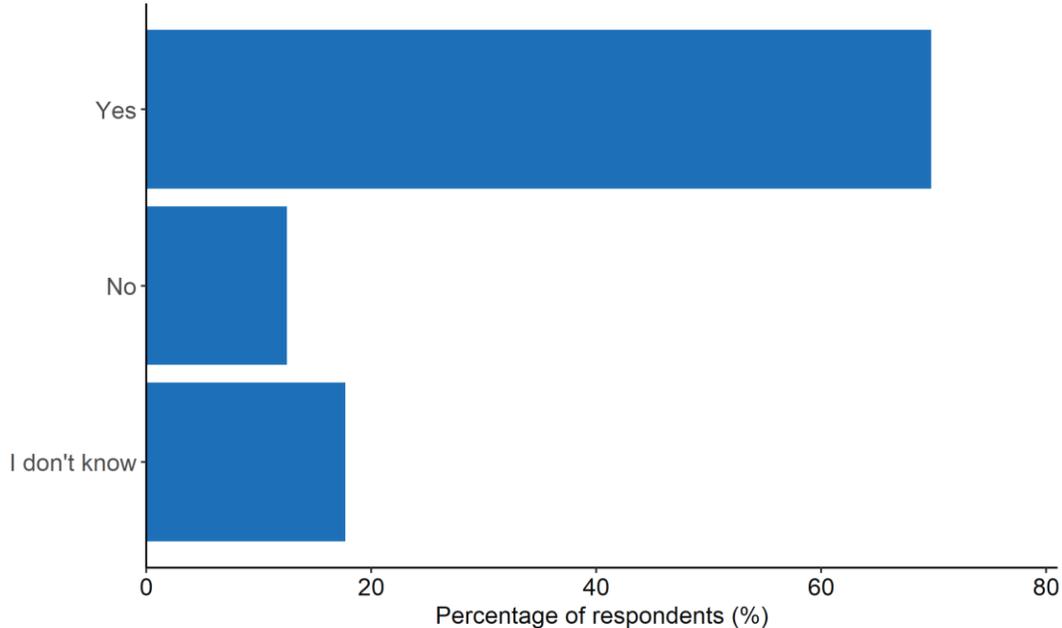
⁸ Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey: Summary of returns Waves 1 to 12. (November 2020). Department for Education.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/933661/VCYP_Survey_publication_W12.pdf

⁹ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)



returned to school in September, but the anticipated demand has not yet materialised. Only 82% of children with a social worker were attending school on 24th September 2020 and there was a large increase in the number of applications for elective home education¹⁰ so this may reflect a continued lack of contact with professionals.¹¹

Do you think your current caseload will increase as we ease out of lockdown?



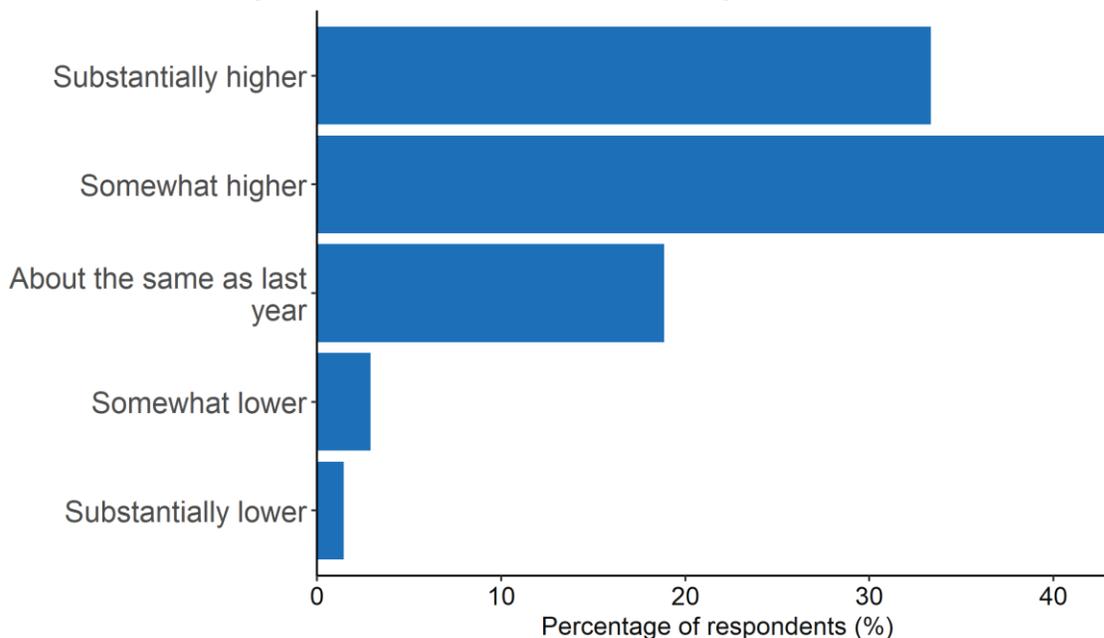
Date: July 2020
Number of respondents: 98
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

¹⁰ Whittaker, F. (23rd October 2020). Investigation: Minister intervenes as home education soars. Schools Week. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/investigation-minister-intervenes-as-home-education-soars/>

¹¹ Longfield, A. (2nd October 2020). *Amid the coronavirus uncertainty, millions of children are back in school* [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/10/02/amid-the-coronavirus-uncertainty-millions-of-children-are-back-in-school/>



How do you expect your caseload to be over the coming winter (November - February) relative to the same period last year?



Date: October 2020
Number of respondents: 69
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

Referrals to See, Hear, Respond Partnership (SHRP), coordinated by Barnardo’s and funded by the Department for Education, have increased substantially from September 2020, coinciding with the return to school. SHRP received 1000 referrals in the week beginning 12th October,¹² which more than makes up the 4% drop in referrals to children’s services in Wave 11 (5th-7th October 2020) compared with the three year average. However, it is not clear whether referrals to the SHRP are a direct replacement for the missing expected referrals to statutory services or the referrals are about different children and young people and different concerns. The main reasons for referrals to SHRP from June to October 2020 have been concerns about a child’s mental health, isolation and loneliness, barriers to reintegration to education, parenting support and parents’ mental health. These are different categories to those used by children’s services, so would not be comparable.

Although referrals hadn’t increased as expected in September, local authorities report that the complexity of the cases referred to them has increased.¹³ The changes to ways of working within the workforce have raised challenges around responding to the usual needs in addition to the hidden harms.

¹² Singer, C. (November 2020). *Data about children’s lives in the pandemic: A pilot study on the experiences of children, families and teachers in England during the coronavirus pandemic*. Open Data Institute. <https://theodi.org/article/data-about-children-during-covid19/>

¹³ *Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey: Summary of returns Waves 1 to 12*. (November 2020).



Virtual assessments and meetings between practitioners and families

Face-to-face meetings and home visits are usually an important part of a social worker's and family support worker's toolbox. However, in-person visits under social distancing are challenging in the context of working with children, particularly those in need of protection. Young children don't understand social distancing measures and a lack of contact can be problematic when children are accustomed to seeking the comfort of tactile support from a practitioner. Masks can also be scary for the children and wearing PPE can give the impression that the social worker thinks the family is contaminating. Some families, particularly those living in emergency accommodation, don't have the space to allow for social distancing of two metres. Additionally, social workers and their employers have very little control over the family's home environment and handwashing behaviour is likely to be low in cases where neglect is a concern.¹⁴ In addition to these safety concerns, there are concerns around privacy: social workers entering the home in PPE is also a very conspicuous sign of state intervention. Although social workers have made use of garden visits, given the need for confidentiality and that it is easy for conversations to be overheard, these are limited to observation of the relationship between child and carer and the child's behaviour.¹⁵

From conversations on WWCSO Talks, local authorities varied in the extent to which they moved home visits to "virtual visits". According to qualitative work by EIF,¹⁶ home visits have mostly been carried out by social workers rather than family support workers. To pick out some examples, North Yorkshire continued to do the vast majority of child protection visits face-to-face - mostly on the doorstep - as they felt it was important to continue to see the families when so many other professionals were not, but visited a much smaller proportion of looked after children because the foster carers were available to give regular updates as to the child's wellbeing. Others, such as Bath and North East Somerset, arranged their visits on a duty rota. Research by the University of Birmingham suggested that local authorities who do not provide social workers with good quality smartphones struggled to support virtual visits.¹⁷

Several representatives from local authorities on WWCSO Talks and in open text responses in the WWCSO polling, mentioned using "RAG" (red, amber, green) ratings to assess cases as to the current level of risk to the child. In qualitative research between March and June 2020 by the University of East Anglia, social workers expressed concerns about the unintended consequences of prioritising high-risk cases, for example, the risk of prioritisation leading to a long term raising of thresholds for intervention and the comparatively lower risk cases becoming

¹⁴ Ferguson, H., Kelly, L. & Pink, S. (June 2020). *Research Briefing One: Child Protection, Social Distancing and Risks from COVID-19*. University of Birmingham / Monash University. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/publications/research-briefing-1-child-protection-risks-covid-accessible.pdf>

¹⁵ Ferguson, H., Kelly, L. & Pink, S. (July 2020). *Research Briefing Two: Disruption and renewal of social work and child protection during COVID-19 and beyond*. University of Birmingham / Monash University. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/publications/research-briefing-2-child-protection-disruption-renewal-accessible.pdf>

¹⁶ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)

¹⁷ Ferguson et al. (June 2020)



invisible.¹⁸ However, qualitative work by EIF found RAG ratings a helpful focus point for close multi-agency working in facilitating a higher level of information sharing.¹⁹ A social worker from the WWCSA stakeholder advisory group mentioned the continual need to challenge the assessment that a virtual visit was sufficient as she expressed concern that some of her colleagues had got very comfortable working from home. The following factors were mentioned as having been taken into consideration as to whether a virtual visit was sufficient or whether a home visit was required: what they knew about the child's situation already and any additional risk arising from Covid-19, such as whether the child was attending school (as they were eligible to), whether they were visible to other professionals, any additional pressures the family may be experiencing, the health needs of the family and whether the technology was available and accessible. Access to (fast) internet varies across the country²⁰ and by socio-economic group, and engagement with digital technologies varies according to various socio-demographic characteristics.²¹ Access to smartphones and laptops is also variable. Additional laptops have been provided to local authorities to distribute to care leavers, children with a social worker and year 10 pupils without a social worker by the Department for Education²² and local authorities have also made use of financial assistance to pay for such equipment. In some cases, schools have made their computer labs accessible to parents requiring a stable connection or IT equipment.²³

Most relevantly to our cohort, a 2011 study identified subgroups who are more likely not to “be seen” in communications with social workers: disabled children, adolescents, children from ethnic minority backgrounds (Horwath, 2011²⁴), and children in asylum-seeking and refugee families (although qualitative work by EIF suggest that adolescents are engaging well with virtual contact in the current circumstances²⁵). Children with learning disabilities tend to be more reliant on non-verbal communication and less able to meaningfully engage with virtual contact.²⁶ A review of the existing literature (where the evidence comes mainly from online therapy and social work to service remote communities) also suggests that the quality of the existing relationship is another

¹⁸ Cook, L. L. and Zschomler D. (2020). *Child and family social work in the context of COVID19: practice issues and innovations. Briefing Paper*. Norwich: CRCF. Available at <http://www.uea.ac.uk/crcf>

¹⁹ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)

²⁰ *CDRC Maps: Broadband Download Average Speeds 2017*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://maps.cdrc.ac.uk/#/metrics/bband/>

²¹ Steyaert, J., & Gould, N. (2009). Social work and the changing face of the digital divide. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(4), 740-753.

²² *Laptops, tablets and 4G wireless routers provided during coronavirus (COVID-19)*. (20th November 2020). Department for Education. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/laptops-tablets-and-4g-wireless-routers-provided-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

²³ Molloy, D. (30th October 2020). *Celebrating Healthy Relationships Week: what we have learned about reducing parental conflict*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/blog/celebrating-healthy-relationships-week-what-we-have-learned-about-reducing-parental-conflict>

²⁴ Horwath, J. (2011). See the practitioner, see the child: The framework for the assessment of children in need and their families ten years on. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(6), 1070-1087.

²⁵ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)

²⁶ Malcolm Carey, K. A. P. J., & Doherty, P. (2018). Barriers Facing Social Workers Undertaking Direct Work with Children and Young People with a Learning Disability Who Communicate Using Non-Verbal Methods. *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(1), 88-105.



factor to consider when assessing whether virtual visits would be appropriate.²⁷ An initial first visit prior to digital delivery of services has been found to support the creation of a therapeutic alliance (agreement on the goals of the work and the tasks to achieve them, as well as positive reciprocal feelings).²⁸

There are several benefits of virtual meetings with families: the more instantaneous nature of communication over virtual channels facilitated “little and often” contact with families, allowing social workers to be more responsive and more familiar with family’s everyday lives. Indirect forms of communication such as text / chat also enabled the initiation of conversations about difficult topics.²⁹ Representatives from children’s services and voluntary sector organisations also mentioned in WWCSO Talks that conflict can more easily and safely be managed in virtual meetings, for example, an attendee with challenging behaviour can be muted, and that virtual meetings tend to be more focused. Virtual or blended meetings can also change the balance of power between families and children’s services: for example, in Rochdale, for initial child protection conferences, they invited the chair of conference and the parent to a face-to-face meeting but professionals from multi-agency partners joined remotely.³⁰ This changed the dynamics of the meeting: the professionals took a less prominent role in the conference. Another example of this was a young person chairing his own review meeting which he felt more comfortable to do with the meeting being held virtually.³¹ Qualitative work by EIF also found that virtual meetings worked better for some parents than others:

[We are] considering continued digital delivery via Teams, partly because it can improve engagement with parents who have anxiety or other mental health issues...meaning that retention could be improved. - *Children’s Centre Coordinator, North East England*

However, virtual meetings also come with disadvantages: rich information from a home visit³² and non-verbal cues³³ which are more difficult to pick up via virtual communication may be missed. 54% of respondents in the WWCSO April 2020 social worker poll reported that it was

²⁷ Simpson, S., Bell, L., Knox, J., Mitchell, D. (2005). Therapy via videoconferencing: a route to client empowerment? *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 12(2), 156-165. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.436> and Crotty, M., Henderson, J. & Fuller, J. (2012). Helping and hindering: Perceptions of enablers and barriers to collaboration within a rural South Australian mental health network. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 20(4). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2012.01282.x>

²⁸ Simpson, S. G., & Reid, C. L. (2014). Therapeutic alliance in videoconferencing psychotherapy: A review. *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 22, 280–299. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12149>

²⁹ Cook & Zschomler (2020)

³⁰ Hassall, J. (31st July 2020). *Julia Hassall, Rochdale – resilience and Skype discos during lockdown – 31 July 2020* [podcast]. In WWCSO. WWCSO Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>

³¹ Megele, C. (2nd June 2020). *Direct work with children and young people online* [Powerpoint slides]. What Works for Children’s Social Care / Principal Children & Families Social Worker (PCFSW) Network. <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Direct-Work-with-Children-and-Young-People-Online-Claudia-Megele-1.pdf>

³² Cook & Zschomler (2020)

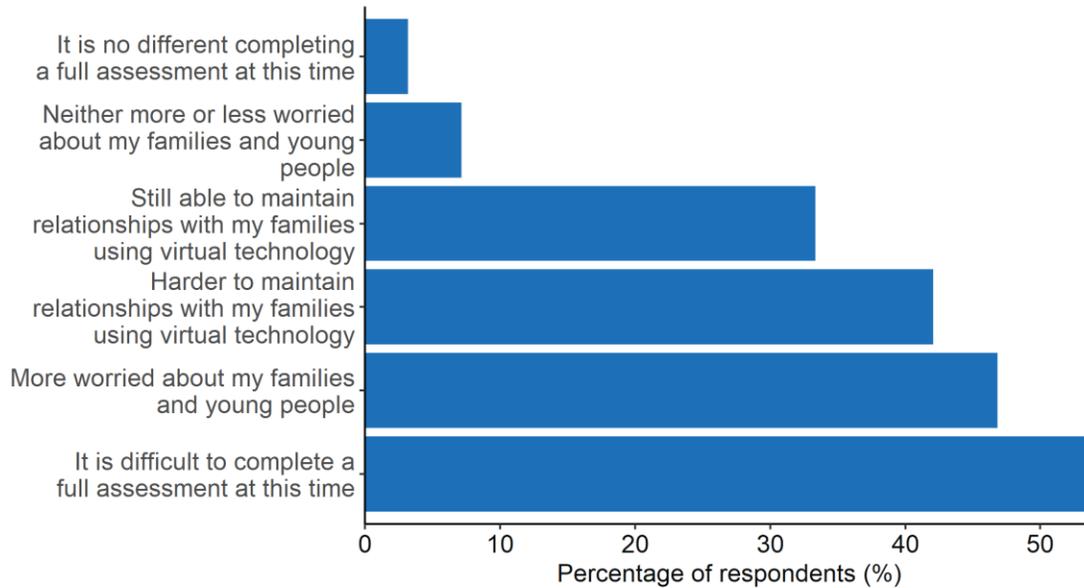
³³ Lishman, J. (1994). *Communication in social work*. Macmillan International Higher Education.



difficult to complete a full assessment at this time with limited home visits and face-to-face meetings.

How has Coronavirus impacted upon your practice since home visits have stopped?

Please choose all that apply



Date: April 2020
Number of respondents: 126
Source: WWCSO Social Worker Panel

Although the informal environment of virtual communication can facilitate sensitive conversations, such conversations can be challenging. Conversations can be cut off off by poor phone signal or wifi.³⁴ In some research by the University of Birmingham, one of the local authorities had only subscribed to the basic Zoom subscription and calls were automatically cut off at 40 minutes, and in another WhatsApp was not approved for some time even though it was a popular means of communication for families and social workers.³⁵ It is also difficult to know whether the conversation is confidential. Reflecting this, 42% of respondents in the WWCSO April 2020 poll reported that it had been harder to maintain relationships with their families using virtual technology.

³⁴ Parkinson, B. (2008). Emotions in direct and remote social interaction: Getting through the spaces between us. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(4), 1510-1529.

³⁵ Pink, S., Ferguson, H. & Kelly, L. (September 2020). *Research Briefing Three: Digital social work – the emergence of hybrid practice during the COVID-19 pandemic*. University of Birmingham / Monash University. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/publications/research-briefing-3-digital-social-work-accessible.pdf>



Previous research has also found that disclosure rates were higher when communication was virtual.³⁶ Whilst greater disclosure by the child, young person or a family member can build a relationship with the practitioner, it can be a cause for concern if the individual has shared more than they intended to, if the risk the disclosure pertains to cannot be managed remotely or if the disclosure is risky in itself, for example, if a disclosure of abuse is overheard by the perpetrator. Greater disclosure by the social worker can make it more difficult to maintain professional boundaries.³⁷ Similar concerns have been raised with regards to remote family court hearings around the difficulties of communicating sensitively, ensuring a family has the opportunity to fully participate in the hearing and concerns and confidentiality.³⁸

There are several practice guides on different aspects of virtual visits which may be helpful. For further information, please see:

- SCIE decision-making tool to establish the best means of working with people³⁹
- SCIE guide on risk assessing under Covid-19⁴⁰
- Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) network and Social Work England guidance on risk assessment and prioritising need⁴¹
- Family Rights Group practice good on initial assessments of family and friend carers under Covid-19⁴²
- PCFSW network and Social Work England guidance on assessing online harms risk⁴³

³⁶ Bryant, L., Garnham, B., Tedmanson, D., & Diamandi, S. (2015). Tele-social work and mental health in rural and remote communities in Australia. *International Social Work* 61(1), 143-155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872815606794>

³⁷ Mishna, F., Bogo, M., Root, J. et al. (2012). "It just crept in": The Digital Age and Implications for Social Work Practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 40, 277–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-012-0383-4>

³⁸ Ryan, M., Harker, L. & Rothera, S. (2020). Remote hearings in the family justice system: a rapid consultation. Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/app/nuffield/files-module/local/documents/nfjo_remote_hearings_20200507-2-.pdf

³⁹ Matching interventions and people: A decision-making tool to establish the best means of working with people. (Updated September 2020). SCIE. <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/social-workers/matching-interventions-with-people>

⁴⁰ Safeguarding children and families during the COVID-19 crisis. (Updated 2nd November 2020). SCIE. <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/safeguarding/children>

⁴¹ The PCFSW Best Practice Guide for Risk Assessment and Prioritising Children and Families' Needs during Pandemic. (3rd April 2020). The Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) Network. <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Documents/Learning-and-development/social-work/psw/PSW-best-practice-guide-for-risk-assessing-children-and-families-needs-and-risks.pdf>

⁴² Simmonds, J., Adams, P., Ashley, C., Lynch, C., & Johnson, J. (June 2020). Assessment Guide: Delivering good practice initial assessments of family and friends carers in the context of Covid-19, June 2020. Family Rights Group. https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Viability_Assessments/initial-family-and-friends-care-assessment-a-good-practice-guide.pdf

⁴³ Social Work England and PCFSW Best Practice Guide for Assessing Online Risks, Harm and Resilience and Safeguarding of Children and Young People Online. (Updated 26th May 2020). Social Work England and PCFSW. <https://esafeguarding.org/publications/PSW=and-SWE-Best-Practice-Guidance-for-Assessing-Online-Risks,-Harm-and-Resilience-and-Safeguarding-Children-and-Young-People-Online-2020-05-26.pdf>



- PCFSW network and Social Work England guidance on virtual visits⁴⁴
- Youth Endowment Fund's guide which outlines which approach might be appropriate under which circumstances: remote, detached / street-based, outdoor activities and basic needs provision⁴⁵
- EIF's recommendations on digital delivery of services.⁴⁶

Virtual direct work with children, young people and families

Social workers have continued direct work with children and families virtually and to a lesser extent face-to-face with social distancing. Examples mentioned on WWCSO Talks and webinars and EIF resources include:

- Drawing and using finger puppets with younger children⁴⁷
- Using pictures to introduce how the school environment might look very different⁴⁸
- A weekly disco⁴⁹
- Taking advantage of intrusions from pets to engage the child's curiosity and allow them to project feelings onto the pet⁵⁰
- A social worker talking a foster carer through making a bird table with a young person⁵¹
- Going for a socially distanced walk to have a difficult conversation⁵²
- The creation of a new Facebook page to reach new parents, to which the local authority attributes a high attendance at a subsequent event⁵³

The Local Government Association also maintains a list of examples of innovative practice by local authorities in response to Covid-19. The examples are detailed, and some examples share materials and contact details. Of particular relevance to this work is the "Children, young people and education" list.⁵⁴

⁴⁴ Buzzi, P., Megele, C., & Blackmore, S. (Updated 5th May 2020). *The PCFSW & Social Work England Best Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/Online Home Visit*.

<https://esafeguarding.org/publications/PSW-and-SWE-Best-Practice-Guide-for-Video-Call-and-Virtual-Home-Visit-20200505.pdf>

⁴⁵ *Engaging young people during the Covid-19 pandemic*. (2020). Youth Endowment Foundation.

<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/YEF-Insights-Brief-1-Engaging-young-people-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic-FINAL.pdf>

⁴⁶ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)

⁴⁷ Megele, C. (2nd June 2020)

⁴⁸ Kelly, M. (10th July 2020). *The COVID-19 response in North Yorkshire – with Martin Kelly OBE – 10 July 2020* [podcast]. In WWCSO. WWCSO Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>

⁴⁹ Hassall, J. (31 July 2020)

⁵⁰ Megele, C. (2nd June 2020)

⁵¹ Kelly, M. (10 July 2020)

⁵² Megele, C. (2nd June 2020)

⁵³ Molloy, D. (30th October 2020)

⁵⁴ *COVID-19: good council practice*. (2020). Local Government Association. Retrieved from <https://www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-good-council-practice>



EIF reviewed the literature on digital services (focusing more on the delivery of programmes / interventions) rather than assessments and recommended: developing strategies to maintain engagement and develop systems to monitor attrition and that digital delivering should prioritise interactions between service users and practitioners, clearly identifying the components of an intervention which must be maintained.⁵⁵

The review found that virtual and digital interventions can be effective in improving outcomes for young people across a wide range of intervention types and outcome measures. There was a consistent set of messages around how services can be delivered well virtually:

- Delivering the first session in-person
- Increasing contact frequency with the practitioner: either supplementing the provision of resources and information, or communication with participants in real time
- Practitioners adapting their behaviour and communication style, by:
 - Provide more deliberate non-verbal responses
 - Actively paying attention to social cues/emotionality through facial expression, tone of voice and body language
 - Asking more questions than normal to avoid misunderstandings.⁵⁶

Virtual contact with birth families

Local authorities have a legal duty under the Children's Act 1989 to allow the child reasonable contact with his / her parent or guardian and a small number of other individuals. Although there have been exceptions to the rule of six⁵⁷ to allow for contact with birth families, much contact has occurred via virtual means.

Feedback to TACT⁵⁸, the UK's largest fostering charity, has been that in some cases the quality of contact has improved. Children and young people are much more in control of the situation - they can hang up if they want to and are in familiar surroundings. There has also been increased consistency in attendance as parents can call in from wherever they are, and birth parents like that they can view the home environment of their children.

However, as noted above, virtual contact does not work well for all. The Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand helpline received a large number of calls concerning children and young people accommodated under voluntary care orders due to their disability but who were accustomed to family contact and staying at the family home regularly. They reported distress that face-to-face contact had ceased and that they could not meaningfully engage with

⁵⁵ Martin, McBride, Masterman, Pote, Mokhtar, Oprea, & Sorgenfrei (April 2020)

⁵⁶ Martin, McBride, Masterman, Pote, Mokhtar, Oprea, & Sorgenfrei (April 2020)

⁵⁷ *Local restriction tiers: what you need to know*. (23rd November 2020). Department of Health and Social Care. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-restriction-tiers-what-you-need-to-know>

⁵⁸ Elvin, A. (15th May 2020). *Interview with Andy Elvin, CEO of TACT, the UK's largest fostering charity – 15 May 2020*. In WWCSC. WWCSC Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>



virtual contact⁵⁹. It is also more difficult for younger children and children with special education needs.

For more information, please see:

- The Fostering Network's checklist for social workers on contact arrangements⁶⁰

Supporting placement stability

According to TACT,⁶¹ as of May 2020 there was very little placement breakdown from the beginning of the first national lockdown in March 2020 (there do not seem to be published statistics on placement breakdown during this period). Foster carers usually spend lots of time handling issues that arise at school, and this source of tension was removed with the child or young person not attending (many did not attend even though they were eligible to do so). However, lockdown presented other challenges such as young people not adhering to social distancing measures and this putting vulnerable carers at risk.

Some local authorities have re-deployed activity centres for holiday camps or respite care to work intensively with foster families to prevent placement breakdown. TACT has been using reflective supervision to assess and support foster carers' emotional wellbeing. Attendance at carer support groups has also increased because of a lack of need to travel.

Mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families

Examples from other pandemics have demonstrated the negative impact of pandemics on the mental health of a population.⁶² Measures to prevent the spread of the virus mean reduced social interaction and support is available at a time of heightened need for it.

There has been a considerable amount of research to ascertain the impact of coronavirus on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (for example, surveys by Barnardo's⁶³,

⁵⁹ *Childhood in the time of Covid*. (September 2020). The Children's Commissioner. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/cco-childhood-in-the-time-of-covid.pdf>

⁶⁰ *Covid-19 contact arrangements: Social worker checklist*. (2020). The Fostering Network. <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/covid-19contactarrangementssocialworkerchecklist2.pdf>

⁶¹ Elvin (15th May 2020)

⁶² The intersection of COVID-19 and mental health. (November 2020). *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 20(11). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(20\)30797-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30797-0)

⁶³ Davies, M., Chandler, L., Woolford, R., Adams, J., Faruq, D., Carmichael, T., Bezer, O., Carter, K., Smith, A., Martins, G. & Clarke, P. (2020). *Mental Health and Covid-19: In Our Own Words*. Barnardo's. <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/mental-health-covid19-in-our-own-words-report.pdf>



the Children's Commissioner for Wales⁶⁴, Mind⁶⁵, NIHR⁶⁶, The Children's Society⁶⁷, the Oxford Achieving Resilience during Covid (ARC) study⁶⁸ and Young Minds⁶⁹). It is our intention to summarise what we can learn from these surveys and other relevant surveys about the impact of coronavirus on vulnerable children in the final report.

There was considerable concern over the mental health and wellbeing of care leavers due to their higher level of isolation. Become, the care leavers' charity, has seen a doubling of the number of calls to their one-to-one support line compared to the same time last year. On these calls, care leavers have mentioned struggling with mental health and isolation and being concerned about their finances, the disruption to their education and whether they can stay in their accommodation. In a survey by Become, 55% of 251 respondents reported that they were particularly worried about feeling lonely and isolated.⁷⁰ Good practice amongst higher education institutions has involved the institutions providing a named contact for care leavers and being proactive in reaching out to care leavers to assist them with queries.

In the practice database, some local authorities mentioned online counselling and interventions to target both the child and parents' mental health. There is some evidence base on these types of interventions and these are well summarised by EIF's review of the evidence on virtual and digital delivery of services.⁷¹

Interventions to reduce parental conflict

Given the reports of an increase in family stress as a result of lockdown, interventions to reduce parental conflict may be useful. There are two mentions in the practice database of such interventions and in EIF's webinar on reducing parental conflict, many local authorities described adapting services to address parental conflict as a result of the support provided by the national

⁶⁴ *Coronavirus and Me*. (2020). The Children's Commissioner for Wales.

https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FINAL_formattedCVRep_EN.pdf

⁶⁵ *The mental health emergency: How has the coronavirus pandemic impacted our mental health?* (June 2020). Mind. https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/5929/the-mental-health-emergency_a4_final.pdf

⁶⁶ Widnall, E., Winstone, L., Mars, B., Haworth, C. & Kidger, J. (August 2020). *Young People's Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Initial findings from a secondary school survey study in South West England*. NIHR. <https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Young-Peoples-Mental-Health-during-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-Report.pdf>

⁶⁷ *Life on Hold: Children's Wellbeing and Covid-19*. (July 2020). The Children's Society.

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/life-on-hold-childrens-well-being-and-covid-19.pdf>

⁶⁸ University of Oxford. (2020). Oxford ARC Study: achieving resilience during Covid-19: psychosocial risk and protective factors amidst a pandemic in adolescents. <https://oxfordarcstudy.com/>

⁶⁹ *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs*. (2020). Young Minds.

https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf

⁷⁰ *Supporting care-experienced and estranged students in higher education – responding to Covid-19*. (2020). Become, Stand Alone, the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL), the Unite Foundation and Spectra. <https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/media/2279/supporting-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-in-higher-education-responding-to-covid-19.pdf>

⁷¹ Martin, McBride, Masterman, Pote, Mokhtar, Oprea & Sorgenfrei. (April 2020)



Reducing Parental Conflict programme led by the Department for Work and Pensions.⁷² Examples include, developing a dedicated YouTube channel.⁷³ EIF has done a considerable amount of work in this area and so we refer practitioners to the dedicated hub of resources on the EIF website (<https://reducingparentalconflict.eif.org.uk/>).

Use of payments to provide practical support to families

Parents may have lost their jobs or been furloughed: a representative survey of 5500 parents with at least one child entering Reception in September 2020 or a child in school aged 4 - 15 from the Institute of Fiscal Studies, found that of the parents who were in paid employment as of February 2020, only 53% were in paid employment as of the end of April 2020.⁷⁴ A much smaller survey of low income families by the Child Poverty Action Group found that 8 out of 10 respondents reported being worse off financially than before the pandemic and half reported being much worse off.⁷⁵ Additionally, practical support, such as with childcare and housework, from wider support networks decreased.

A 2018 systematic review found that children from economically insecure families experience three to nine times more maltreatment than children from economically secure families, and that income loss was one of the most reliable predictors of child maltreatment.⁷⁶ The Family Stress Model⁷⁷, for which there is evidence across diverse family circumstances⁷⁸, demonstrates how economic hardship affects both relationships between parents and the quality of parenting. For these reasons, interventions to directly counter the income loss or provide material support may be protective. Several examples in the practice database cited increased and more flexible use of Section 17 financial assistance, and financial assistance to care leavers to provide material support during the lockdown period. For example, using Amazon vouchers to allow families to buy equipment and games, paying for respite breaks and paying family members to provide additional support.

⁷² Department for Work and Pensions. (12th June 2019). Reducing Parental Conflict programme: information for stakeholders. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-parental-conflict-programme-information-for-stakeholders>

⁷³ Molloy, D. (30th October 2020).

⁷⁴ Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa-Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A. & Sevilla, A. (September 2020). *Family time use and home learning during the COVID-19 lockdown*. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

⁷⁵ Howes, S., Monk-Winstanley, R., Sefton, T. & Woudhuysen. (August 2020). *Poverty in the pandemic: The impact of coronavirus on low-income families and children*. Child Poverty Action Group and The Church of England. <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Poverty-in-the-pandemic.pdf>

⁷⁶ Conrad-Hiebner, A. & Byram, E. (2018). The Temporal Impact of Economic Insecurity on Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 21(1), 157-178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018756122>

⁷⁷ Early Intervention Foundation. (n.d.). Family Stress Model. <https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/cg-rpc-2-2-family-stress-model.pdf>

⁷⁸ Masarik, A & Conger, R (2017). Stress and child development: a review of the Family Stress Model. *Current Opinion In Psychology* 13, 85-90. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.008>.



An EMMIE summary⁷⁹ of the impact of family budget change interventions on children being in care found a combination of no effect and reduced entry to care for interventions increasing family budgets, and no effect and increased entry to care for interventions decreasing family budgets. The summary noted four causal pathways, the most relevant of which to the current context is that practical assistance can build trust between a family and the professional and that removing practical problems allows families to focus on other issues. Evidence related to how to implement these interventions well was limited, and lessons from the USA are less applicable to a UK context due to the differing systems. The summary formed the rationale for the WWCS pilot trials of devolved budgets with three local authorities in England.⁸⁰ In these pilots, the budgets were used to provide practical help, such as paying for nursery provision and driving lessons; building relationships with young people such as paying for a meal or an activity; and therapeutic support. Overall, there was the sense that the budgets provided clear benefits to children and families. Additionally, there was a considerable underspend of the devolved budgets, suggesting that small amounts of money can be helpful. A prerequisite identified was managers granting autonomy to social workers to spend a reasonable amount without authorisation. A 2009 evaluation of a previous similar programme (budget holding lead professionals) found that clarity of the role and training to fulfil it are of crucial importance.⁸¹ There is also a considerable amount of literature available on cash transfers, and an initial mapping suggested that there is also some literature which may help us learn from the use of personal budgets for disabled children, Section 17 financial assistance to children in need and leaving care grants for care leavers. We can review such literature for the full report if this is of interest.

Supporting vulnerable children to have an education

The Challenge

Although school was open to vulnerable children during the first national lockdown, attendance before schools partially re-opened in June 2020 was only 8% of those eligible (children or young people with a EHCP or a social worker).⁸² Their education, exams and educational placements

⁷⁹ Brand S.L., Wood S., Stabler L., Addis S., Scourfield J., Wilkins D. & Forrester D. *How family budget change interventions affect children being in care: a rapid evidence assessment*. What Works for Children's Social Care.

http://orca.cf.ac.uk/132911/1/Wilkins_How%20family%20budget%20change%20interventions%20affect%20children%20being%20in%20care.pdf

⁸⁰ Westlake, D., Corliss, C., El-Banna, A., Thompson, S., Meindl, M. Talwar, R., Folkes, L. & Addis, S. (March 2020). *Devolved budgets: an evaluation of pilots in three local authorities in England*. What Works for Children's Social Care. https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WWCS_Devolved_Budgets_Full_Report_March_20201.pdf

⁸¹ Walker, J., Donaldson, C. Laing, K., Pennington, M., Wilson, G., Procter, S., Bradley, D., Dickinson, H. & Gray, J. (2009). *Budget Holding Lead Professional Pilots in Multi-Agency Children's Services in England*. Department for Children, Schools and Families. <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2566/1/Budget%20Holding%20Lead%20Professional%20Pilot%20in%20Multi-Agency%20Children's%20Services%20in%20England,%20National%20Evaluation.pdf>

⁸² The Children's Commissioner. (Updated 2 November 2020). *School return: Covid-19 and school attendance*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/cco-school-return-covid-19-and-school-attendance.pdf>



were severely disrupted. Children also could not receive the usual pastoral support from school in the same way and were much less visible to professionals.

Supporting attendance

From the conversations as part of WWCSO Talks, we heard from several authorities that they focused on encouraging children on Child in Need plans and Child Protection Plans to attend school because they would be likely less able to take up remote schooling opportunities and are at more risk of suffering harm from the situation at or around home than children without a social worker. Qualitative work by EIF found that early help staff were also concerned that teachers or other professionals within universal services would not be able to identify needs emerging during the lockdown.⁸³ Interventions by children's services have focused on assessing the risk of non-attendance, monitoring attendance and encouraging children and young people who are eligible and for whom attendance would be beneficial for their safety and wellbeing to attend school. For example, Worcestershire Children First (in an intervention funded by WWCSO) encouraged attendance by: providing clarity that vulnerable children could attend their local school (instead of a hub school), setting attendance as an expectation for those eligible and used their existing Signs of Safety practice model to understand what has gone well with being at home and highlight the danger to the child or young person of not attending school.⁸⁴ Another local authority now has automated daily attendance updates from schools.

Supporting parents or carers to engage with their child's learning

With many vulnerable children not attending school or nursery during the first national lockdown, providing support to parents and carers to help them engage with their child's learning and support their child's remote education was important. Looked after children were eligible to attend school during the first national lockdown and some local authorities emphasised the importance of looked after children attending school to relieve pressure on the rest of children's services⁸⁵ but many looked after children remained at home, and some children's services were supportive of this in that children and young people in foster care are with a safe person.

⁸³ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)

⁸⁴ Russell, R. (25th August 2020). *Ensuring a smooth transition back to education* [Powerpoint slides]. What Works for Children's Social Care. <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WWCSO-Autumn-Webinar-Series-Ensuring-a-smooth-transition-back-to-education-and-learning-following-lockdown.pdf>

⁸⁵ Pryor, R. (24th September 2020). *Inclusion and Care in Schools During Covid with Rachael Pryor - Bristol City Council - 24th September 2020*. In WWCSO. WWCSO Talks. Accessible via: <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3luZm0vcy8xZjE3NGM3OC9wb2RjYXN0L3JzcW==>



The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has reviewed 13 interventions aimed at increasing parental engagement⁸⁶ in education, and found that the approach has moderate impact for moderate cost based on extensive evidence. Of the 13 interventions, Families and Schools Together and Family Skills are “Signs of Potential” projects (interventions that appear to have larger positive impacts for young people who have had a social worker than for their peers) according to WWCS’s reanalysis.⁸⁷ The EEF has also reviewed interventions which include the use of digital technology in education,⁸⁸ and found that the approach has moderate impact for moderate cost based on extensive evidence, working well when it supports a well-designed learning system.⁸⁹ One of the digital technology interventions, Affordable Maths Tuition, is also a Signs of Potential project for children with a social worker. WWCS is funding larger trials of Family Skills and Affordable Maths Tuition.⁹⁰

The EEF’s rapid evidence assessment of supporting students to learn remotely⁹¹ was aimed at a school leader and teacher audience but the report highlights that ensuring access to technology and providing strategies to support independent work, for example, checklists or daily plans, are particularly relevant to disadvantaged children, a cohort which overlaps heavily with the cohort of children with social workers and needing early help.

The EEF are also administering the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) and the rollout of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) at no cost to all state-funded primary schools to support the catchup of children and young people who have fallen behind as a result of Covid-19. One-to-one tutoring has a well supported evidence base⁹² and NELI adds two to four months additional

⁸⁶ Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *Parental engagement*.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/parental-engagement/>

⁸⁷ Sanders, M., Sholl, P., Leroy, A., Mitchell, C., Reid, L. & Gibbons, D. (February 2020). What works in education for children who have had social workers. What Works for Children’s Social Care.

https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/WWCS_what_works_education_children_SWs_Technical_Report_Feb20.pdf

⁸⁸ Education Endowment Foundation. (n.d.). *Digital technology*.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/digital-technology/>

⁸⁹ Lewin, C., Smith, A., Morris, S. and Craig, E. (2019).

Using Digital Technology to Improve Learning: Evidence Review. Education Endowment Foundation.

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Using_Digital_Technology_to_Improve_learning_Evidence_Review.pdf

⁹⁰ WWCS. (26th May 2020). New funding announced to evaluate school-based interventions to improve outcomes for children and young people with social workers. <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/blog/new-funding-announced-to-evaluate-school-based-interventions-to-improve-outcomes-for-children-and-young-people-with-social-workers/>

⁹¹ Education Endowment Foundation. (24th April 2020). *Best evidence on supporting students to learn remotely*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-supporting-students-to-learn-remotely/>

⁹² Education Endowment Foundation. (2nd November 2020). *National Tutoring Programme launches in schools*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/national-tutoring-programme-launches-in-schools/>



progress (with a high security evidence strength).⁹³ For younger age groups (0-4 years old), EIF has reviewed activities and toys that support caregiver and child interactions in the early years.⁹⁴

To pick out some examples of how children's services have supported parents and carers, in North Yorkshire, some early help staff who were shielding had been acting as buddies for foster carers to give them a break from supervising the child or young person, for example by supporting school work or virtual baking.⁹⁵ In Rochdale, social workers sent out art packs to allow the foster carers to support creative activities for the children.⁹⁶

For more information, please see:

- EEF summary of support resources for parent⁹⁷
- Oak National Academy: over 10,000 free high-quality video lessons and resources⁹⁸
- Department for Education's Hungry Little Minds campaign (<https://hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk/>)

Sudden and unpredictable shocks to the social work workforce

The Challenge

The existing social work workforce was somewhat reduced due to social workers or family support workers themselves or members of their household contracting coronavirus. However, this reduction was lower than local authorities expected (as reported in open text responses in the VCYP Survey) with a peak of 13% of local authorities reporting over 10% of their social workers being unavailable for work due to Covid-19 in May 2020. Some local authorities in Tiers 2 and 3 mentioned having difficulties with availability again in Wave 12 of the VCYP Survey (late September / early October 2020).⁹⁹ Social workers may also have been home schooling or undertaking additional caring responsibilities during the working day and so may have had disrupted schedules. Social workers for the most part were also working from home without the usual support of being surrounded by a team.

⁹³ Education Endowment Foundation. (Updated August 2020). *Nuffield Early Language Intervention*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/nuffield-early-language-intervention/>

⁹⁴ Asmussen, K. (2019). *Activities and toys that support caregiver-child interaction in the early years*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/activities-and-toys-that-support-caregiver-child-interaction-in-the-early-years>

⁹⁵ Kelly (10 July 2020)

⁹⁶ Hassall (31 July 2020)

⁹⁷ Education Endowment Foundation. (2020). *Covid-19 school support resources: summary for parents*. . https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Covid-19_Resources/Resources_for_parents/Summary_of_Resources_-_Parents.pdf

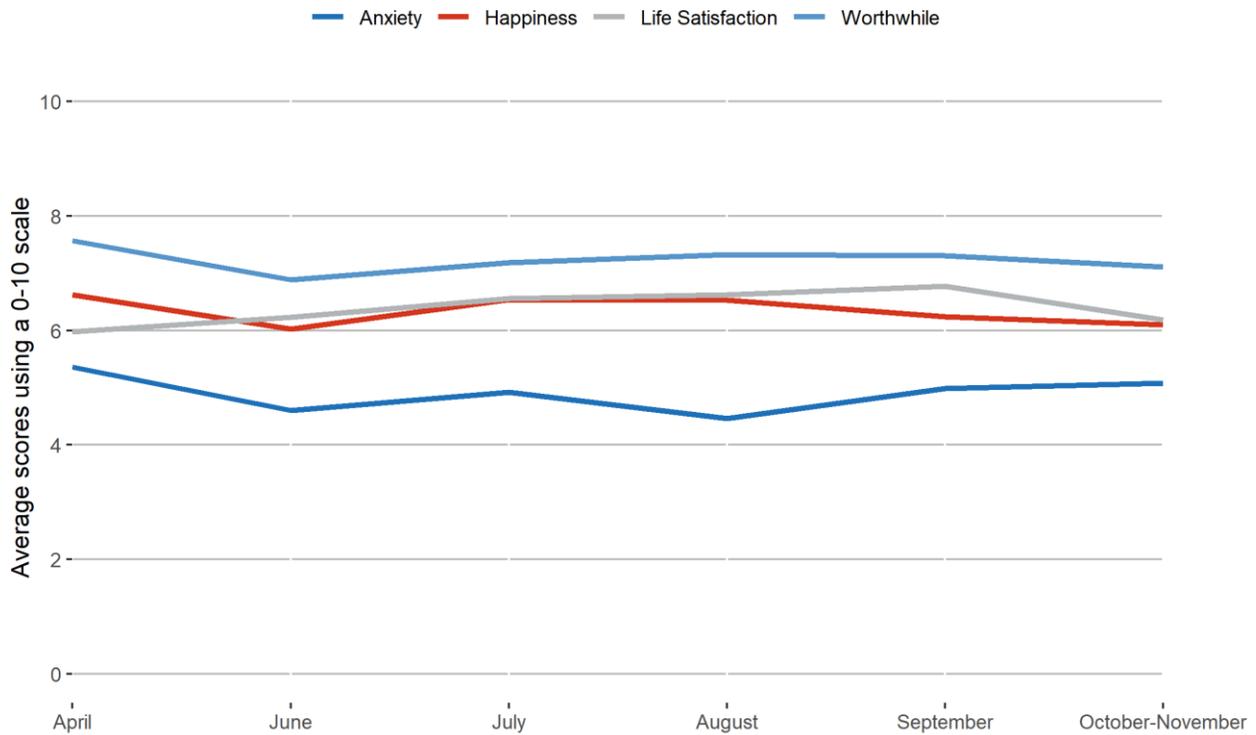
⁹⁸ Reach Foundation. (n.d.). *Oak National Academy*. <https://www.thenational.academy/>

⁹⁹ Department for Education (November 2020).



With the pandemic, and children’s services responses to it, developing rapidly over the course of the year, we might expect to see changes in practitioners’ wellbeing. WWCS tracked the wellbeing of social workers from April until November 2020. As expected, we see high anxiety coinciding with the first peak and rising into the Autumn, and the opposite pattern with life satisfaction. A sense of life being worthwhile was high again at the height of the first peak.

Average well-being measures since April 2020

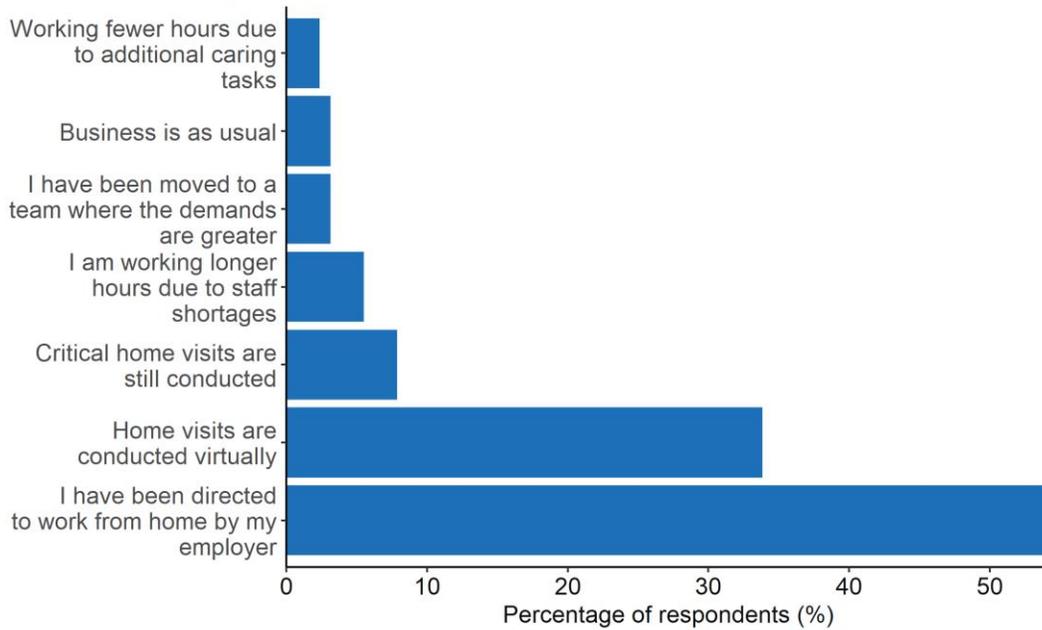


Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

There have been some reports from senior leaders in local authorities and voluntary organisations that staff are finding a better work / life balance due to working at home although the picture appears to be quite split. In the October 2020 WWCS poll, 39% reported a good balance between work and home working whilst 34% reported that they were struggling to balance the two. This is consistent with an earlier poll in June 2020 which reported that 33% of participants felt their work/life balance had deteriorated since working from home. 23% reported that working from home was affecting their family life, and 35% reported that they were struggling to switch off from work.



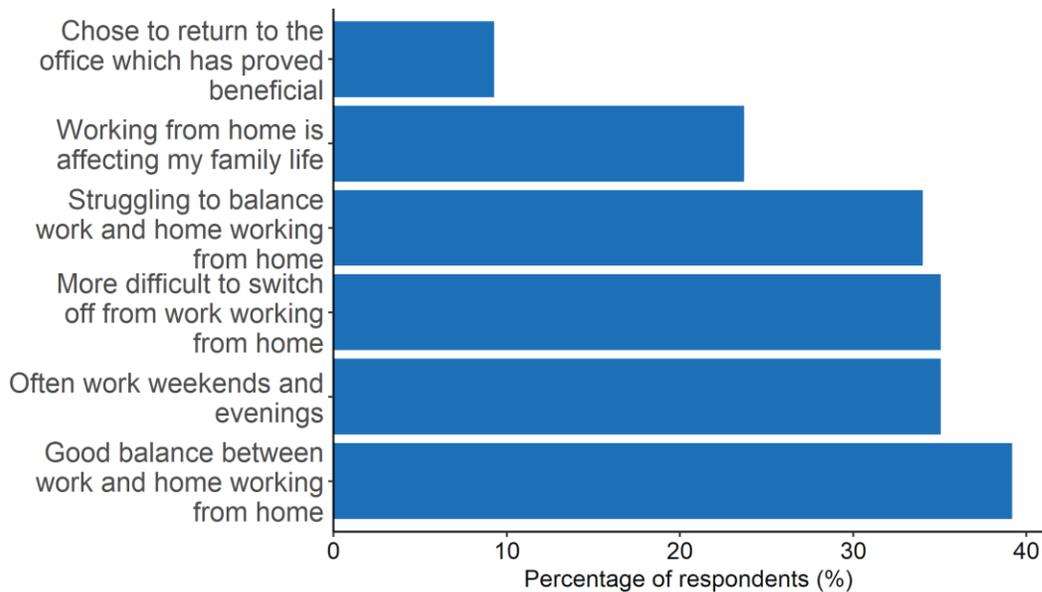
How is Covid-19 impacting your working life?



Date: April 2020
Number of respondents: 129
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

Describe your work/life balance over the last 6 months

Choose all that apply



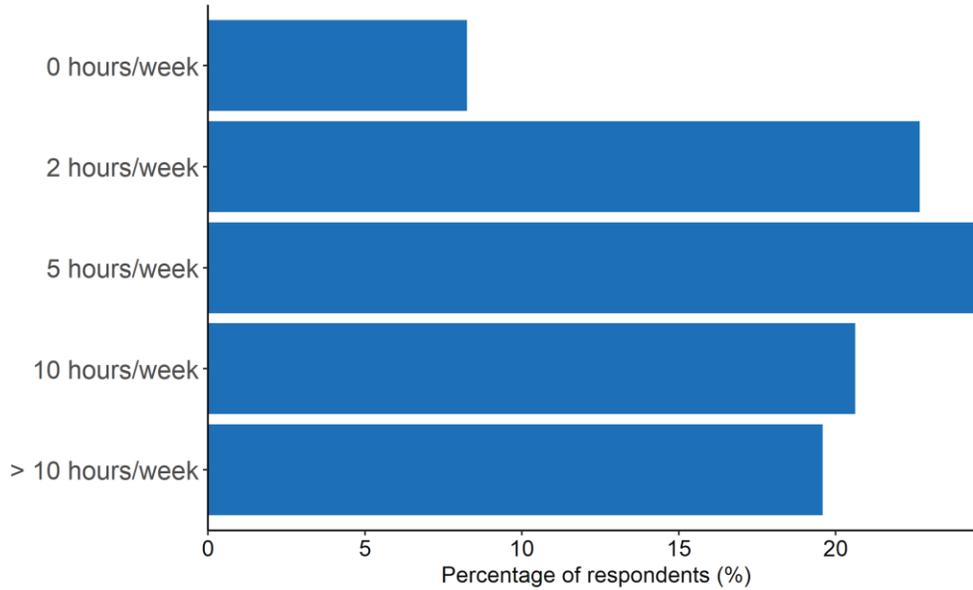
Date: October 2020
Number of respondents: 98
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

Furthermore, 87% reported working additional hours in the October 2020 WWCS poll, with 65% reporting that they worked an average of at least five additional hours a week between April and October. In October, 62% of respondents also reported an increase in caseload compared to a pre-



lockdown caseload. Additionally, 34% reported that they are not able to claim back hours via a TOIL policy and 7% reported that workload is a barrier to claiming back hours.

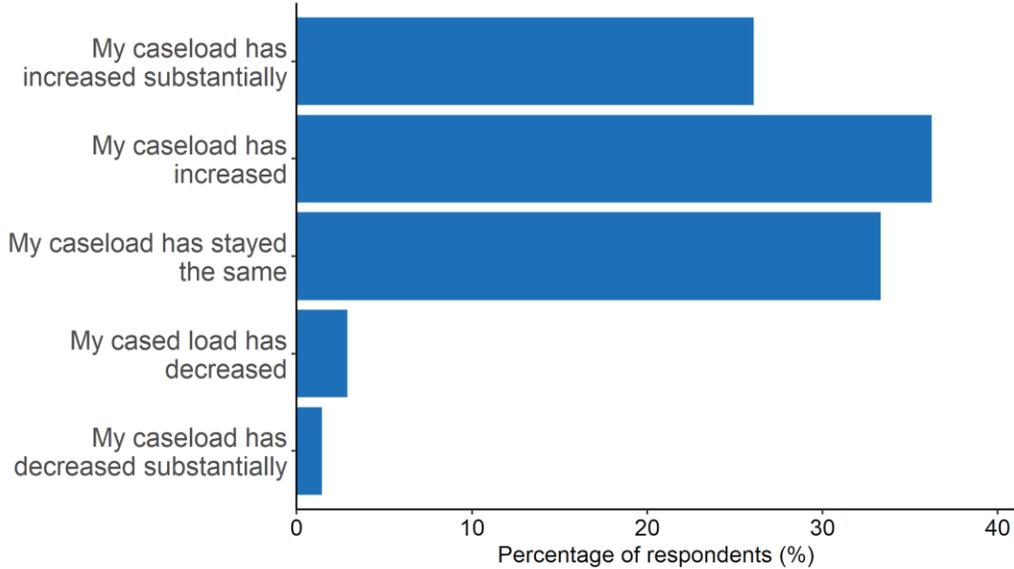
How many extra hours per week have you worked in the last 6 months?



Date: October 2020
Number of respondents: 98
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

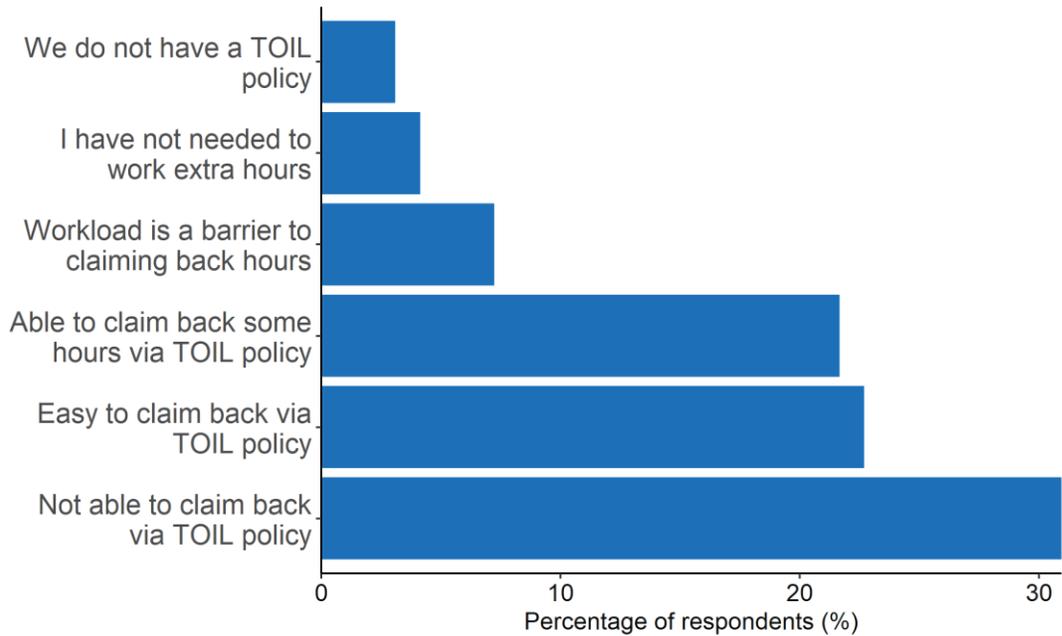


Which of the following statements best describes your current caseload relative to pre-lockdown caseload?



Date: October 2020
Number of respondents: 69
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

What is your experience regarding extra hours worked in the last 6 months?



Date: October 2020
Number of respondents: 98
Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel



Some local authorities allowed for staff to return to the office once to collect equipment to set themselves up at home. Whilst some have created safe spaces for those who were struggling to work from home, for the most part practitioners seemed to be working from home. There were concerns raised over not having one's team around for informal support: although colleagues and managers were available over the phone, a conscious choice to call or email can feel disproportionate to the kind of support needed. Conversations with the WWCSA stakeholder advisory group highlighted that although managers had prioritised supporting their team, managers were getting little peer support themselves.

A social worker in the UEA research¹⁰⁰ mentioned that when working from home, there are no transitions between visits and meetings to allow for mental preparation or processing, and so there is the need to purposely create time for that reflection. It can also be difficult for social workers to find adequate privacy for sensitive conversations, away from disturbances from family and / or housemates, and to separate emotionally intensive discussions from private space.

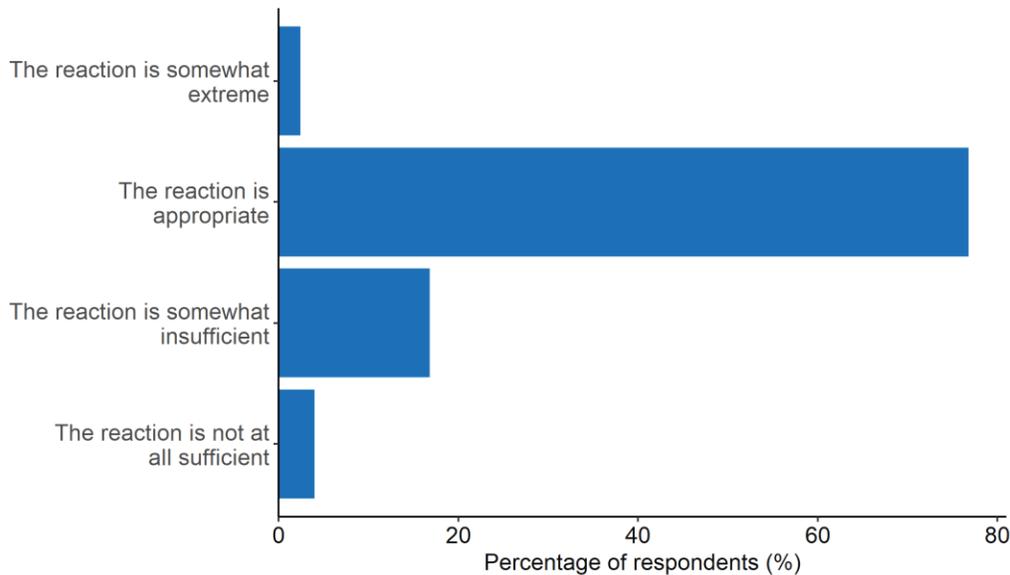
Despite some concerns over access to personal protective equipment as mentioned in the British Association of Social Worker Mary 2020 survey,¹⁰¹ 77% of social workers in the WWCSA April 2020 survey agreed that their employer's response had been appropriate.

¹⁰⁰ Cook & Zschomler (2020)

¹⁰¹ British Association of Social Workers. (25th March 2020).Voices of social workers through BASW Covid-19 survey set agenda for safety and effective practice during pandemic.
<https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2020/mar/voices-social-workers-through-basw-covid-19-survey-set-agenda-safety-and>



Do you think the reaction of your employer to the coronavirus outbreak is appropriate?



Date: April 2020
 Number of respondents: 129
 Source: WWCSO Social Worker Panel

Recruitment of social workers

Given the concerns about a reduced workforce, Social Work England were given emergency powers to reinstate the c. 8000 ex-social workers who had been out of practice for less than two years. From March 2020, the Home Office provided standard and enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and fast-track emergency checks of the adults’ and children’s Barred Lists, free-of-charge¹⁰² to support rapid recruitment into the children’s services workforce. As of June 2020, about 1000 of the 8000 eligible individuals signed up to return to work via the Social Work Together programme (hosted by the LGA in partnership with Social Work England, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care¹⁰³), and approximately 90 organisations had registered¹⁰⁴ although information on how many social workers actually returned to work is not available. Social Work England worked with Research in Practice to develop an induction pack to welcome ex-social workers back.

¹⁰² Disclosure and Barring Service. HM Government. (27th March 2020, updated 22nd October 2020). *COVID-19: Free-of-charge DBS applications and fast-track Barred List check service*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-of-charge-dbs-applications-and-fast-track-barred-list-check-service>

¹⁰³ Local Government Association. (2020). *Social Work Together Programme - Candidates*. <https://www.jobtrain.co.uk/lga/displayjob.aspx?jobid=936>

¹⁰⁴ Conway. C. (8th June 2020). *Interview with Colum Conway, Chief Executive of Social Work England – 8 June 2020*. In WWCSO. WWCSO Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>



Lessons can be drawn from other professions who have re-recruited former professionals. Literature¹⁰⁵ on retired doctors returning to the profession highlighted the likely high vulnerability of returnees to Covid-19 due to their age group. Returnees and workers redeployed outside of their speciality may also lack the necessary competencies due to lack of practice. The article recommended not deploying retired returnees to roles requiring face-to-face contact but to remote roles where their health can be protected, and drew attention to the need for adequate supervision, induction and wellbeing support. Other guidance¹⁰⁶ for retired returnee doctors recommended that the returnees ask what tasks will be required of them and self-evaluate their own skill set in relation to those tasks.

Social Work England wanted to make sure that student social workers who were due to graduate in 2020 did so to bring much needed new social workers into the profession and to prevent a backlog of students requiring support from training providers in the coming year. Student social workers and apprentices have had disrupted placements throughout the year and have lost opportunities to learn vicariously through observing other social workers. Social Work England is exploring what additional support they may need during their ASYE year.¹⁰⁷

For more information, please see:

- NSPCC's guide to recruiting safely during coronavirus¹⁰⁸

Adaptation of role

There has been a great deal of guidance focusing on the practicalities of working during Covid, for example, helping social workers adapt to virtual visits and working from home. Considering how the role of the social worker changed in meeting the different needs families during a pandemic is also important. Social workers need to be included in emergency planning so that children and families are represented. Social workers' roles may be different at different phases of the pandemic.¹⁰⁹ They have a role in providing practical support, for example, making sure that families have sufficient food and access to the medicine they need. Moving into the recovery phase may include helping children, young people and families reflect on and process the emotional impact of the

¹⁰⁵ Pesiah, C., Hockey, P., Benbow, M. S., Williams, B. (2020). Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in: the older physician in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Psychogeriatrics* 32(10) (Special Issue: COVID-19 and Psychogeriatrics), 1211-1215. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1041610220000599>

¹⁰⁶ American Medical Association. (Updated 28th March 2020). *Senior physician COVID-19 resource guide*. <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/senior-physician-covid-19-resource-guide>

¹⁰⁷ Conway (8th June 2020)

¹⁰⁸ NSPCC. (6th November 2020). Recruiting safely during coronavirus.

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/may/recruiting-safely-during-coronavirus#article-top>

¹⁰⁹ British Association of Social Workers. (28th May 2020). *The role of social workers in a pandemic and its aftermath: learning from Covid-19*. <https://www.basw.co.uk/role-social-workers-pandemic-and-its-aftermath-learning-covid-19>



pandemic and helping children and young people engage with the world again.¹¹⁰ The recovery and reconstruction phase will also involve responding to pent up demand, and finally building a 'new normal'.

Social workers can also take on the role of supporting health colleagues,¹¹¹ translating public health guidance into something accessible to children and young people, and gatekeeping access to other services. With so much of the focus of government policy and changes being on mitigating the spread of coronavirus, the rights and entitlements of children and families can be forgotten. Social workers can take a role in advocating on behalf of the children, young people and families they work with in an emergency situation and ensuring that they are not disadvantaged in prioritisation decisions.¹¹²

Working from home and preparing to return to the workplace

Some social workers in the UEA research¹¹³ reported finding the more informal support they'd usually get from their team from a team WhatsApp group. Informally, social workers have also mentioned making time for online meetings involving social conversation, for example, a shared tea / coffee break and lunch. Members of the WWCSA stakeholder advisory group also mentioned being conscientious about not booking back-to-back meetings in their colleagues' diaries to allow time for reflection, and being purposeful about where they work in their home. For the most part, supervision has continued but virtually for social workers working from home.

¹¹⁰ Elvin (15th May 2020)

¹¹¹ Dominelli, L. (2020). *Guidelines for Social Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic*. University of Stirling.
https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/Social%20work%20advice%20Covid%2019%20BASW_0.pdf

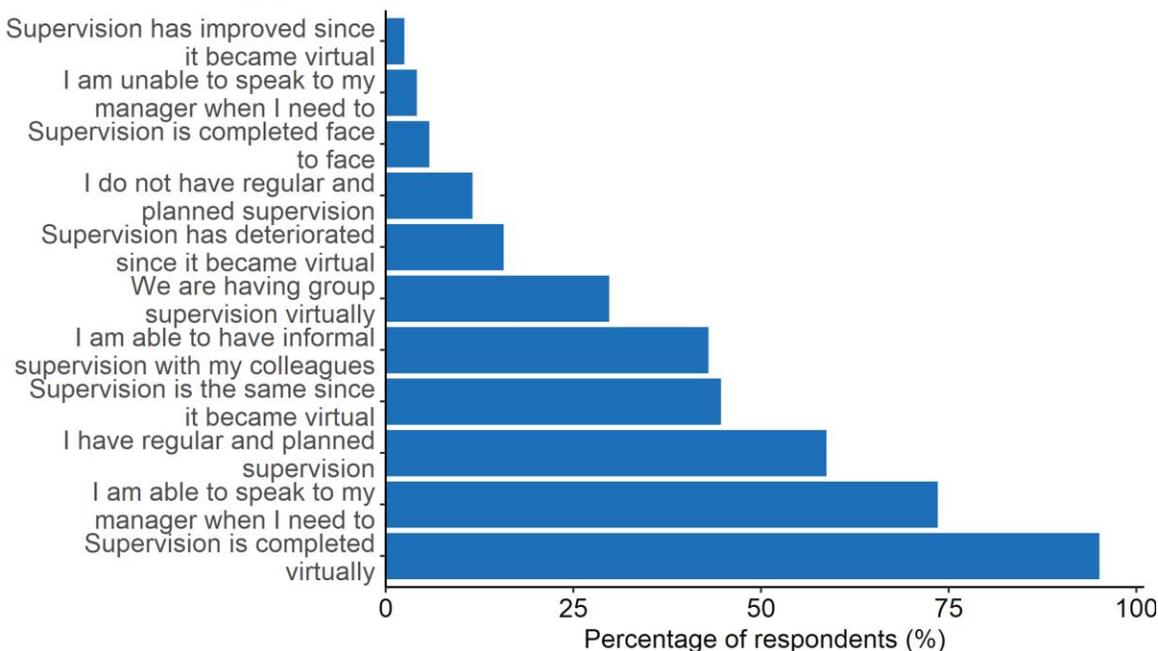
¹¹² Walter-McCabe, H. (2020). Coronavirus Pandemic Calls for an Immediate Social Work Response. *Social Work in Public Health* 35(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2020.1751533>

¹¹³ Cook & Zschomler (2020).



How is your supervision managed at this time?

Please choose all that apply



Date: May 2020
 Number of respondents: 121
 Source: WWCSO Social Worker Panel May 2020

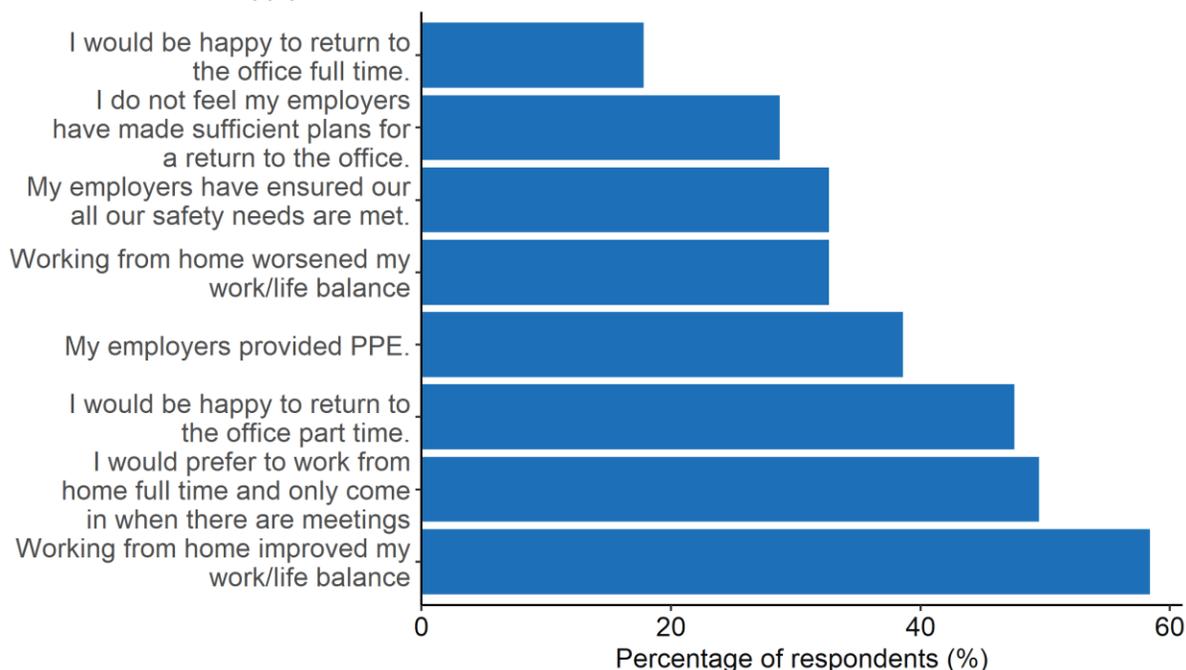
Although working from home practice is continuing, local authorities may wish to start planning their return to the office. A review¹¹⁴ of the existing literature on “return to work” after an illness emphasised that policies that demand uniform compliance to new ways of working are unrealistic and recommended employers consider factors which will affect returning to work. Workers returning after having contracted coronavirus may experience fatigue, challenges with travelling to the workplace and social stigma. Workers may have quite different needs pertaining to adaptations after illness and local authorities should be responsive to those needs. The review also emphasised the importance of line managers in interpreting guidance set by organisations.

¹¹⁴ Shaw, W.S., Main, C.J., Findley, P.A. et al. (2020). Opening the Workplace After COVID-19: What Lessons Can be Learned from Return-to-Work Research? *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* 30, 299–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10926-020-09908-9>



Views on returning to the office/employers' plans to support you

Please choose all that apply



Date: June 2020

Number of respondents: 101

Source: WWCS Social Worker Panel

What practice changes will local authorities keep?

Changes in relationships

Representatives from local authorities have mentioned in the EIF qualitative work and WWCS Talks, shifts in several dynamics which they noted as positive and hope to keep going forwards. A social worker from Bath and North East Somerset noted on WWCS Talks that there was a renewed focus on providing care, and offering practical and material help, for example, helping clear a garden of rubbish to create an area for the children to play.¹¹⁵ Food parcels are going to families who never would have received one previously, which may encourage the breakdown of the perception of the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor.¹¹⁶ The coronavirus and the associated upheaval is a common experience amongst families and professionals, which has been a great

¹¹⁵ Devine, R. (24th July 2020). *Social work during COVID-19 with Richard Devine, a social worker in BANES – 24 July 2020*. In WWCS. WWCS Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>

¹¹⁶ Walker, S. (20th May 2020). *Interview with Steve Walker, Director of Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Improvement Programme at Leeds City Council – 20 May 2020*. In WWCS. WWCS Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>



leveller.¹¹⁷ Virtual meetings also mean fewer professionals intruding in the home¹¹⁸ and that children and young people can control whether they hang up and whether to show their face.¹¹⁹ The use of video calls is something children and young people are very familiar with. As articulated by Clive Jones, the outgoing Executive Director, Children's and Family Services of Telford and Wrekin Council:

We've gone into the children and young people's world.¹²⁰ - *Clive Jones*

A blended approach to face-to-face and virtual working

Representatives from local authorities speaking on WWCSA Talks mentioned that they expect to maintain some aspect of remote work, for example, being open to more requests to work from home, requesting for social workers to attend courts virtually based on positive feedback from staff, and moving towards a combination of face-to-face and virtual contact with birth families. This has worked well for adolescents and has been less disruptive for families with frequent contact, and for families visiting a child or young person far from home, for example, in youth custody settings.¹²¹ Some local authorities may return predominantly to face-to-face meetings and visits to try to reassert an "old normal", as was the case with one local authority in research by the University of Birmingham.¹²²

Working with multi-agency partners to safeguard children

One of the consistent messages has been that Covid-19 has facilitated better multi-agency working. Joint referral systems, joint triaging and universal self report helplines cutting across local authority departments have supported this. For some local authorities, the nature of the emergency had unblocked longstanding barriers to data sharing:

'In the past, this would have taken months ... because of constraints in place within the local authority. Partners are being open to innovation which will help to leave this legacy.' - *Early Help Lead, East Midlands*

¹¹⁷ Hassall (31st July 2020)

¹¹⁸ Elvin (15th May 2020)

¹¹⁹ Jones, C., Britton, J. & Loveridge, H. (4th September 2020). *Communication, cooperation, calmness and coffee breaks*. In WWCSA. WWCSA Talks. Accessible via <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3luZm0vYcy8xZjE3NGM3OC9wb2RjYXN0L3Jzcw/episode/ZDRINzE5ODYtNzVINCO0ZjhkLWFhZTUtZjgyZjJjNzlyMDA1?sa=X&ved=0CA0QkfYCahcKEwi01uDSqqLtAhUAAAAAHQAAAAQAQ>

¹²⁰ Jones, Britton & Loveridge (4th September 2020)

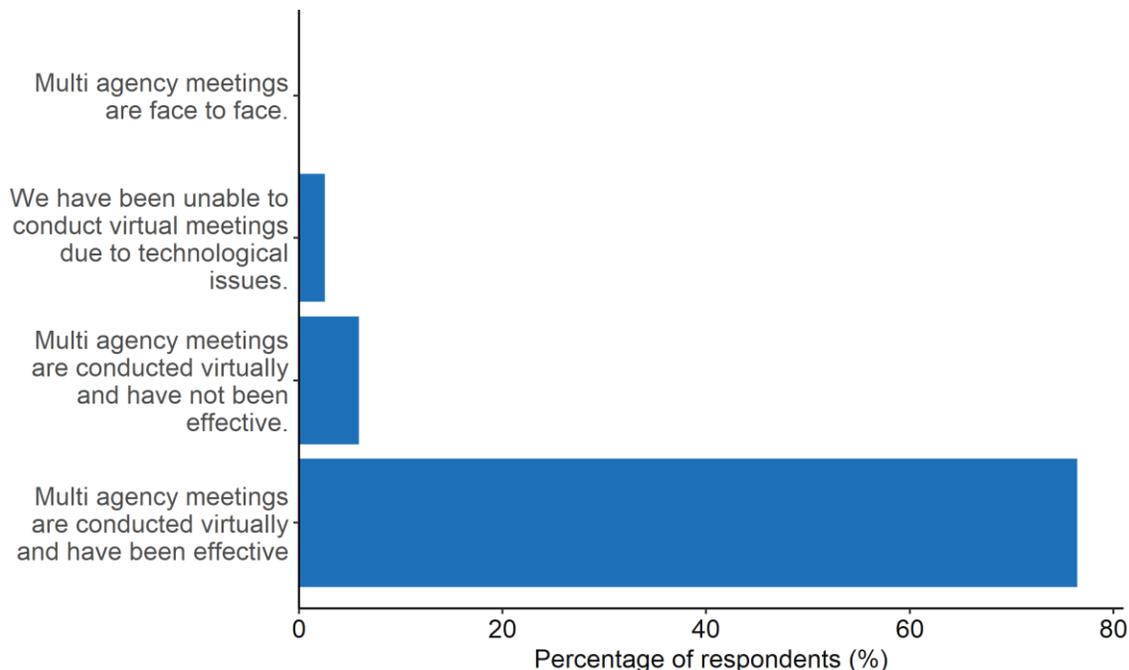
¹²¹ The Association of Directors of Children's Services. (July 2020). *ADCS Discussion Paper: Building A country that works for all children post Covid-19*. https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_Building_a_country_that_works_for_all_children_post_Covid-19.pdf

¹²² Pink et al. (September 2020)



The approach has been “If in doubt, consult”¹²³ (practice leader, Rochdale Council) which has been well received. In the May 2020 WWCSO poll, 76% of respondents reported that multi-agency meetings are being conducted virtually and have been effective.

How are you managing working with partner agencies?



Date: May 2020
Number of respondents: 121
Source: WWCSO Social Worker Panel May 2020

To pull out a few examples, in addition to the work with schools described above:

- Some Children's centres remained open and functioned as spaces for social workers and family support workers to work with particularly vulnerable families, working alongside midwives and health visitors who could not work out of hospitals or health centres. Children's centres also acted as hubs for the provision of essential services, for example, food banks.¹²⁴
- Police officers parked their cars at nearby locations, such as shops, which might be accessible to victims of domestic abuse, for example, food shops to make themselves available for support and advice on safeguarding.¹²⁵

¹²³ Hassall (July 2020)

¹²⁴ Wilson & Waddell (June 2020)

¹²⁵ Silver, J. (3rd July 2020). *Domestic abuse and COVID-19 – in conversation with Jo Silver, SafeLives – 3 July 2020*. In WWCSO. WWCSO Talks. Accessible via <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/covid-19-resources/>



DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings

The Covid-19 pandemic has been and continues to be extremely disruptive to children and young people's lives. It is important that we find methods to safely adapt practice in ways that support children, young people and families in the best way possible, both in terms of immediate practical help and long-term recovery. We must monitor such adaptations for effectiveness and ensure that a "new normal" draws on the positive lessons learned.

It is critical that we support vulnerable children and young people to catch up as they return to school and early years settings, and that we support children and young people in the aftermath of 'hidden harms' they've experienced over the past nine months and through the difficulties of the expected economic downturn.¹²⁶

There is much to be learned from:

- 1) **The circumstances under which it is possible to support children and young people well from afar.** Emerging evidence suggests that virtual and digital support works well for children and young people with protective factors, such as children living with a foster carer who can provide updates on the child or young person and children with a good existing relationship with the practitioner. For certain families, virtual and digital support is more challenging, such as for very young children, children with special educational needs or disabilities or where access to technology is poor, as well as for families that may conceal risks.
- 2) **A renewed focus on offering practical and material support to families** (in addition to protection from risks). There is likely to be much financial hardship in the subsequent years after the pandemic and such practical help can build trust between a family and the practitioner and remove practical problems to allow families to focus on other issues.
- 3) **The positive examples of multi-agency working to safeguard children** over the course of the pandemic. Although arrangements will need to be reviewed as we create a "new normal", multi-agency safeguarding during Covid-19 had demonstrated the benefits of information sharing and closer working relationships.
- 4) **A blended approach to face-to-face and virtual working** where multi-agency meetings could be held remotely to maintain high attendance and some contact with families could be held virtually.

¹²⁶ Elliot, L. (23rd November 2020). *UK risks double-dip recession amid second Covid lockdown*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/23/uk-double-dip-recession-second-covid-lockdown>



APPENDIX

Sources of grey literature

What Works organisations and other non-university research institutes

Early Intervention Foundation (<https://www.eif.org.uk/>)
Education Endowment Foundation (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>)
Social Care Institute for Excellence (<https://www.scie.org.uk/>)
Research in Practice (<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/>)
What Works for Children's Social Care (<https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/>)
Youth Endowment Fund (<https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/>)

Government and children's services support organisations

Association of Directors of Children's Services (<https://adcs.org.uk/>)
British Association of Social Workers (<https://www.basw.co.uk/>)
Child Safeguarding Review Panel (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel>)
Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (<https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/>)
Frontline (<https://thefrontline.org.uk/>)
HM Government (<https://www.gov.uk/>)
Local Government Association (<https://www.local.gov.uk/>)
Office of the Children's Commissioner (<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/>)
Ofsted (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>)
Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) Network (skillsforcare.org.uk/cfpsw)
Skills for Care (<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/>)
Social Work England (<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/>)

Academic Institutions

Department of Social Work and Social Care, University of Birmingham (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/social-work-social-care/>)
CASCADE, Cardiff University (<http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade/>)
Children's Social Care Data Users' Group (<https://cscdug.co.uk/>)
Centre for Research on Children & Families, University of East Anglia (<https://www.uea.ac.uk/web/groups-and-centres/centre-for-research-on-children-and-families>)
NIHR Health & Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/scwru>)
Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University (<https://www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/>)
Rees Centre, Department of Education, University of Oxford (<http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-centre/>)
Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, UCL (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/thomas-coram-research-unit>)



Voluntary Sector Organisations

Action for Children (<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/>)

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (<https://www.annafreud.org/>)

Article 39 (<https://article39.org.uk/>)

Barnardo's (<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>)

Coram (<https://www.coram.org.uk/>)

Child Poverty Action Group (<https://cpag.org.uk/>)

Family Rights Group (<https://www.frg.org.uk/>)

NSPCC (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>)

National Youth Agency (<https://nya.org.uk/>)

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (<https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/>)

Safe Lives (<https://safelives.org.uk/>)

The Children's Society (<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/>)

Health

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/>)



What Works *for*
**Children's
Social Care**

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