

IASW Social Work During Covid-19 Survey

Final Report

The IASW Social Work During Covid-19 Survey was informed by 456 responses over a seven week period from 12th May – 29th June. Data collection was structured in three phases, each corresponding with the Government phases for Reopening Ireland/Easing Lockdown Restrictions.

Key Findings

Social workers were increasingly worried about the challenge of providing an adequate and quality service over the course of the data collection, increasing from one in three social workers at the outset to two in three social workers at the end. Social workers were primarily concerned that changes in the delivery of social work services, meant that people were not receiving the level of quality of social work support they required.

Client well-being emerged as a key concern. One in three social workers worried about clients, how they were coping with ongoing public health restrictions in the absence of, or reduction in, key supports and services. Social workers highlighted the increased vulnerability of those who were already living with risk, vulnerabilities and marginalisation prior to Covid-19.

Unsurprisingly, given the centrality of human relationships in social work practice, social workers struggled with the loss of direct work with clients, with over half (54%) of respondents identifying the challenges associated with restricted, or lack of, direct face to face work with clients as their biggest challenge. Key aspects of social work practice, such as building trusting relationships, meeting with individuals and their families, visiting people in their own homes, completing thorough assessments and interventions, were all significantly more challenging and in some cases impossible.

Given the sensitivity and systemic nature of social work practice, remote work practices only provided partial solutions to these challenges. Forty-six per cent of social workers identified challenges associated with working remotely.

While IT and communication apps/tools were considered useful during this time of restrictions on physical contact, social workers were clear that working online was not a substitute for working face to face in the same physical space with clients. The limitations of online working have severely impacted the nature and effectiveness of social work services and the foundations on which professional decisions are based. Social workers highlighted the limitations of telehealth when working with young children, with people with disabilities, cognitive impairment, communication difficulties or those living with risk in their lives. Some clients simply don't have the technology or the skills to participate, creating a digital divide and unequal access to services.

One in five worried about their own safety and well-being and that of their families during the pandemic.

Many respondents worked without the resources, equipment and supports required to do their job and there was little improvement in the levels of support and resources provided by employers throughout the course of data collection. Essential supports missing for some were:

- IT resources and support
- Professional supervision and support
- Practice guidance and protocols (e.g., to support home visits)
- Essential tools for working away from the office (e.g., mobile phone, laptop, online access to case records).

Social workers need increased support to do their job in the context of

- Rapidly changing work practices.
- Severe decline in face to face contact with social work peers and access to peer support and supervision
- Decrease in contact and connection with service users
- Increased demands at home and in personal life
- Loss and change in nature of many workplace supports (admin, printing, desk)
- Decreased access to professional and client supports and services
- Increased anxiety and worry generally

In addition, social workers asked that their work and role during the pandemic be valued and acknowledged.

Positive developments emerged as social work practice adapted to new ways of working. Social workers clearly demonstrated their resourcefulness and creativity in times of crisis. They adapted practice, thought outside the box and created solutions to develop contact and connection with clients in order to ensure their needs were met, to deliver a safe, quality service and to do their utmost to keep clients safe and supported, insofar as possible.

However, social workers in some organisations were concerned that a lack of engagement with and representation of social work at strategic level, both nationally and within organisations meant that there was little opportunity to share and develop this expertise. Social workers were concerned that the absence of this expertise at strategic level resulted in a failure to understand or respond to client needs, that there was a failure to take a person centred or rights based approach, and that the dominant narrative was a biomedical one.

Social workers also expressed concern about involuntary redeployment and about the impact of redeployment on their clients who became increasingly vulnerable during the pandemic. The policy of removing essential services from the most marginalised and vulnerable at a time of reduced social contact and supports is one that increases the risk and harms to many people as well as increasing the burden on those struggling to cope and manage on a day to day basis. This policy decision has unnecessarily left too many vulnerable people without social work services while living with the risk of violence, abuse and/or neglect in their homes.

Key Recommendations

Social workers delivered clear and consistent messages from frontline practice about what was happening for the most vulnerable and marginalised in Irish society during the pandemic. These messages are of the utmost importance for policy makers, employers and social work professionals. Children and adults living with violence, abuse or neglect, family carers, people with disabilities, people with mental health difficulties, communication difficulties or cognitive impairment and those with drug/alcohol problems were often left without essential social work and primary care services. Social workers saw that the absence of, and drastic reduction in, essential support services coupled with the reduced access to personal networks during restrictions, dramatically increased the risks and stresses experienced by these populations. In simple terms, the situation of the most marginalised worsened over the seven-week period of data collection.

Recommendation 1 Employers need to ensure social workers are provided with the tools, resources and supports required to do their job, whether working from home or the workplace. The key supports identified were:

- Increased access to technology
- Professional supervision, support and guidance
- To be valued and acknowledged

Recommendation 2 Investment is required to ensure social workers and clients can safely meet. It is essential that virtual contact does not replace human contact over time if social workers are to support and safeguard people when they most need care and protection. The ethical implications of moving social work online needs be given consideration in consultation with people using social work services.

Recommendation 3 Immediate cessation of redeployment of social workers to swabbing and tracing services and other non-social work posts. It is imperative that social workers are identified as essential workers in all organisations and are protected from redeployment (and returned to post immediately if redeployed). Resource social work teams to address the backlogs related to redeployment.

Recommendation 4 There is a clear need for the expertise and perspectives of social work at organisational and national level to inform and influence the choices of policymakers as they respond to the psychosocial needs of the population.

Recommendation 5 Social workers need access to peer support on a structured regular basis as well as support from employers to engage in same. Peer support is essential for social workers to capture and share the knowledge developed through practice, and to consider how social work values and ethics can guide and support social workers in the very changed contexts within which social work is practiced.

Recommendation 6 Employers consult with social work staff to learn from their experiences of support, guidance, communication and management during Covid-19 to inform future organisational responses. This opportunity could also be used to share examples of best practice and key learning across organisation and the social work profession.

Recommendation 7 The safe reopening of support services is urgently required (i.e. day support, mental health services, family support programmes). The closure and reduction of services and redeployment of other key Health and Social Care Professionals has stripped services and supports from the most vulnerable in Irish society.

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