

BASW England Mental Health group position statement on the impact of COVID-19

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work in the UK with offices in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. With over 20,000 members we exist to promote the best possible social work services for all people who may need them, while also securing the well-being of social workers working in all health and social care settings.

The BASW England Mental Health group consists of academics, practitioners, managers and students.

Since the outset of this crisis BASW Mental Health group have worked tirelessly with colleagues including Steve Chamberlain (Chair of the Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) Leads network) and Mark Trewin (from the Chief Social Worker's Office at the Department of Health & Social Care to make sure that the needs and rights of social workers in mental health settings, and the people they support are not forgotten in these challenging times.

So far, we have hosted 2 webinars, as well as developing guidance for Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHPs) and their managers to keep people safe and manage well during the current crisis. Here are the weblinks: <https://www.basw.co.uk/covid-19-webinar-frontline-amhps> and <https://www.basw.co.uk/covid-19-webinar-amhp-leads-and-psws>.

A lot of concern has been raised by people about the potential impact of the Coronavirus Act 2020 on people with mental health needs. This includes reduced access to social care services, to reduced protections and rights if the mental health amendments are enacted. More specifically, we have concerns that the amendments focus on a lack of s12 doctors (which whilst problematic, can currently be managed using s4 as is currently enacted) and make no reference to the impact of further reductions in an already stretched AMHP workforce. Our recommendation, therefore, is that the changes to the Act should only be used where it is no longer possible to get a second doctor for a s4 application in a timely way.

Feedback from members has helped us to focus recent efforts on ensuring that AMHPs and their specific vulnerabilities are recognised. In particular, AMHPs must have access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and (along with other social workers and social care professionals) to robust testing when it becomes available. In addition, we have been working to influence the development of guidance to ensure as much flexibility is available as possible. We particularly look forward to clarification on the use of video conferencing in mental health assessments/interventions. Clearly, the use of technology needs to take account of the impact on different individuals, balance the rights of individuals to legal protections and consider the impact of delays in waiting for professionals to attend in person.

Statistically, 10% of all mental health act assessments (approximately 1400 annually or 270 a week) take place in Accident & Emergency (A&E) after informal presentation. Given the current pressurised situation in A&E departments and the risks of COVID-19 transmission, **we call on NHS England to:**

- Ensure all A&E's, acute trusts and mental health trusts work together to release liaison staff from other duties
- Promote the creation of assessment hubs away from A&E (so that those without Covid-19 symptoms or other physical health needs are directed away from A&E). It is unethical to expect

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either patients experiencing a mental health crisis, or staff responsible for supporting them to be directed into high risk 'red' zones in A&E for want of an alternative solution.

We also call on the Government to make good its promises of parity with physical health and ensure that sufficient resources are available in communities to support people suffering mental distress as a result of both COVID-19 and pre-existing issues. A wealth of financial and specialist resources are needed both now and in the longer-term to build the people's resilience and positive mental health.

Claire Barcham (Chair of the Mental Health group)

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