

Post Lockdown Ethical Guidance for Social Workers

Introduction

BASW provides overarching ethical guidance: *The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work*. BASW also provides ethical guidance on specific ethical situations, which draw on the Code. BASW produced *Covid 19 – Ethical Guidance for Social Workers* to support social workers in their tasks under the pandemic.

As the UK moves into a post-lockdown situation it was thought helpful to produce guidance on the ethical issues that social workers might face. This is the purpose of the *Post Lockdown Ethical Guidance for Social Workers*.

If further public health restrictions are imposed BASW will review the guidance it has previously issued.

Context

The guidance starts by noting the differences between the four nations of the UK in responding to Covid and sets out the role of employers before considering a range of situations that might require an ethical response.

All four of the nations of the UK have moved to post lockdown guidance.

Social workers will need to familiarise themselves with the relevant guidance in their own country, and adhere to it, both in their personal and professional aspects of their life. The details of the guidance are updated regularly so social workers will need to keep up to speed with this.

In England, because of political considerations, there has been much more emphasis on 'personal responsibility' and 'common sense', followed by confusion about what is, and what is not, the right thing to do. For example, the debate about face masks on public transport resolved by guidance in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales has been left open in England, resulting in some transport authorities (for example, London, Manchester) to set their own rules.

Despite moving beyond lockdown, government guidance across the four nations is that the vaccination process should continue. Many social workers will have already been 'double-jabbed'. BASW reiterates its call that all social workers – unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary - should take advantage of the opportunity to be vaccinated.

[Covid-19 and Vaccination: A BASW position statement | www.basw.co.uk](https://www.basw.co.uk)

Health and Safety

Social work employers across the UK are required under legislation to take responsibility for the health and safety of their employees

It is anticipated that there will be some variation between employers about how the requirements of health and safety are interpreted. For example, employers will make choices, influenced by health and safety considerations, about whether, and when office working should be re-instated. Variation between employers is not automatically a problem since specific situations vary between employers, for example, a poorly ventilated basement office may pose more of a Covid risk than a well-ventilated office.

Social workers will need to familiarise themselves with their employer health and safety guidance and adhere to it. They should also be willing to challenge employers if guidance is problematic or lacking, or if they have any other concerns about their own safety at work or the safety of their colleagues.

BASW and SWU have issued a joint statement on health and safety during the Covid-19 pandemic:

[Update: Covid 19 Health and Safety Statement and Guidance | www.basw.co.uk](https://www.basw.co.uk/updates/covid-19-health-and-safety-statement-and-guidance/)

Post lockdown ethical guidance

The post lockdown ethical guidance draws on *The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work* and includes references to the Code.

The guidance is divided into two:

- Interaction with people using services; and,
- Interaction at the office and with colleagues.

Interaction with people using services

Virtual meetings and face-to-face meetings with people using services

During the pandemic virtual meetings with people using services have become common. People using services may prefer to maintain virtual meetings only, and/or they may have very good reasons for maintaining virtual meetings (for example, they may be shielding).

Social workers may also prefer to maintain virtual meetings over face-to-face meetings. While there are some situations where virtual meetings promote inclusivity and accessibility, social work also prioritises the importance of relationships in achieving their task. Social workers will need to give careful thought to whether the default position of 'virtual' over face-to-face is always the best option.

The preferences of people using services must be respected and balanced against informed, contextual and holistic risk assessment. Social workers should ask their employers for evidence informed guidance on assessing risk, for example when

considering moving back to face to face meetings or reducing physical distancing, or when moving back to home visits rather than more controlled contexts.

The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work requires that social workers respect the right to self-determination of people using services and promote the right to participation. In this post-lockdown situation, this may mean ensuring people using services have best available information about ongoing risks to themselves and others from the coronavirus despite the progress in vaccination and change in government guidance.

Home visits

During the pandemic, undertaking virtual meetings with people using services rather than home visits has become common. People using services may choose to maintain virtual meetings only, and/or they may have very good reasons for maintaining virtual meetings (for example, they may be shielding). Sometimes people using services may actively opt for face-to-face over virtual and this choice must be appropriately respected.

Social workers may also prefer to maintain virtual meetings over home visits. However, physically visiting a home can give information that a 'virtual only' visit cannot. On occasion, social workers may need to override the expressed preferences of people using services not to undertake a home visit as an essential part of undertaking the task required.

The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work requires that social workers assess and manage risk and act with the informed consent of people using services, unless required by law to protect that person or another from risk of serious harm.

Mask wearing when undertaking a face-to-face meeting with people using services

When undertaking a face-to-face meeting with people using services, people using services may choose to wear a face mask. Social workers may also choose to wear a face mask.

A great deal of communication takes place by facial expression and therefore face masks can impede communication between individuals. While it is inappropriate for a social worker to ask a service user to remove their face mask, depending on the task and their own personal circumstances social workers will want to consider carefully whether the practice of wearing a face mask in all face-to-face meetings is appropriate.

Ongoing use of virtual meetings may reduce the need to wear masks. Social workers will need to consider the best way of supporting each individual in his or her particular circumstances and taking account of personal preferences and assessed risk.

The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work requires that social workers take responsibility for developing professional relationships and communicating effectively.

Poverty

The pandemic has damaged large areas of the economy: businesses have been closed and people have lost their jobs. The pandemic has also highlighted the widening gap between the rich and the poor. There is a continuing need for social workers to practice in a way that is 'poverty aware'.

The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work requires that social workers challenge oppression and unjust policies and practices.

BASW has also produced resources for social workers assisting people who are affected by poverty:

[Anti-poverty practice | www.basw.co.uk](http://www.basw.co.uk)

Unjust systems and Oppression

The pandemic has highlighted the very different outcomes that individuals and communities face in our society. For example, Covid infection rates, and consequently death rates, have been much higher among some black and ethnic minority communities. There is a continuing need for social workers to be aware of the injustices in the system and practice in a way that as far as possible, mitigates these affects.

The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work requires that social workers challenge oppression and unjust policies and practices.

[BASW UK Statement on Anti-Racism | www.basw.co.uk](http://www.basw.co.uk)

Interaction at the office and with colleagues

At this time of writing patterns of return to the office are not yet clear. It seems at least some employers are anticipating working from home being 'the new normal' and have disposed of office accommodation, while others seem likely to ask for a return to the workplace.

Dependent on individual circumstances working from home can carry both advantages and disadvantages: it can improve life / work balance by eliminating the needs for travel to the office and help manage childcare. It can worsen the life/work balance by perpetuating a sense of work always 'being on', create additional pressure through the need for home schooling and perpetuate a sense of isolation from supportive colleagues.

Some social workers may seek an exemption from a return to the office due to the need to shield. They are entitled to expect that their employers will adhere to the relevant legislation and guidance in considering any requests for reasonable adjustments.

Dealing with differences of opinion

The complexity of situations as personal, professional and team circumstances interact will give rise to situations where 'the answer' is not always obvious.

Respectful dialogue, between social workers and People using services, between social workers and their colleagues and between social workers and managers is key.

The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work requires that social workers are transparent and professionally accountable.

Final version 13/08/2021