

Social Work, Human Rights and Digital Technology

Conference Report



BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers

FOREWORD

Digital technology is often hailed as the solution to many problems, but it also has the potential to lead to greater injustices and greater inequality in society. In the context of social work this is especially true if technology is used without proper oversight and without input from those with lived experience, and the social workers who support them. The development of the use of digital communication in particular has been accelerated by the experiences of remote working and social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In response to these and other concerns, BASW organised a conference bringing together researchers looking at aspects of the roles, potential and actual, of different forms of digital technology in social work. The contents of these presentations and the discussions they sparked are contained in this report.

I invite you to read this short report and consider how digital technology is already impacting on the way in which social workers operate, what this means for social workers on a professional and on a personal level, and how it can affect relationships with those with whom they work.

Martin Sexton
Chair, Policy Ethics and Human Rights Committee





A NOTE ON STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Following the introduction, this report begins by highlighting the cross-cutting themes that emerged from the presentations and attendant discussions. It then provides a summary of each of the five presentations that were delivered on the day. Several of these projects were still ongoing and therefore the findings presented are accurate as of December 2021 when the conference was held.

Since the conference took place a number of the projects described have now published further work – if you would like more information contact details are provided on the inside back cover.

This report is a resource and presents a range of material to help those in social work consider some issues in relation to the topic of social work, human rights and digital technology. The views expressed in the presentations are those of the presenters and are not necessarily the views of BASW, or research funders. As such it is not a BASW statement on policy or practice.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital technology has been increasingly prominent in social work. This became even more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic, when social distancing and other protective measures reduced the amount of face-to-face work social workers were able to do, increasing reliance upon various forms of digital communication to stay in contact with those with whom they were working. From a social work perspective, core amongst the issues arising are what these developments mean for human rights as digital technology increasingly changes the way in which practice is conducted and in particular the potential implications for Article 8 rights (the right to respect for family and private life).

Yet digital communication is not the only way in which digital technology is now present within social work. Different forms of technology may be in use in social care, for example to monitor older people whose health is poor. Artificial intelligence is beginning to emerge with the use of machine learning and the linking of datasets to inform decision-making. In a more intense form, artificial intelligence is also capable of being used for decision-taking. Linked datasets are also used for research purposes, enabling improved understanding of risk factors and their relationship with specific outcomes, for example. Digital technology can also support repositories of information, allowing for more informed choices – if the data and interpretation stem from a reliable source.

The growing role of digital technology both within social work, but also in other services whose work impacts the lives of people, creates both opportunities and risks. The risks are better-known, with fears that the use of digital technology may exacerbate injustice and inequality, for example through the exclusion of those who are unable to afford more recent devices, mobile data, or internet access. In a world that increasingly operates in

the digital realm, where government services can be “digital by default”, this is a huge challenge for those who are already disadvantaged.

Recognising the growing, and challenging, role of digital technology in social work, BASW initiated a one-day event to explore some of the latest research in the field and how different forms of digital innovation might impact upon social workers, the way they work, and the human rights of both social workers and those with whom they work. Topics ranged from the advantages and disadvantages of different means of digital communication, via the potential implications of various applications of AI in different contexts, through to the realities of agile working for social workers.

This report presents an overview of the presentations from the event before moving on to highlight some of the key cross-cutting themes that emerged from the presentations and discussions on the day. The aim of this report is not to provide recommendations, but rather to introduce content and analysis by exploring what is currently happening and its potential implications going forward.

EMERGING THEMES

● There is no 'one size fits all'

One of the most salient cross-cutting issues from the presentations is one that is very familiar – there is no 'one size fits all' approach that will work for all practitioners and everyone with whom they work. This was particularly evident in the opening and closing presentations with the former exploring the range of interactions between different disabilities and widely used forms of digital communication and the latter drawing out how working virtually impacted practitioners differently.

The need for flexibility and an ability to tailor responses also resonated in the presentation on system design with the use of IT seen as a way to impose generic systems that often failed to meet people's needs. The same could be true of AI systems that look for similarities with known outcomes and fail to take into account the unique circumstances of each individual.

● The individual nature of human rights

Flowing from this point is the recognition that the application of human rights will differ from individual to individual as a consequence of their unique circumstances. Whilst those fundamental rights are outlined, such as the right to respect for private and family life (Article 8), their application should be determined by the circumstances of each individual or family. This can be more difficult to achieve when the use of IT systems is prescriptive and does not take account of individual circumstances.

● The importance of context

Allied to the need for flexibility and tailoring in the use of digital technology is the importance of the context or situation in which it is being applied. This can relate to the bigger picture, such as the difference between using a system where there is money and resource to provide early support and having the same system without money and resource where it can become a tool for monitoring and surveillance.

At the individual level, a person's preference for different communication methods may vary over time and/or in relation to the issues being

handled. The Socialcaretalk website takes seriously the need to capture the experiences of a diverse range of people in different circumstances so that visitors to the site can find stories from people to whom they can relate.

● The risks of exclusion

The move to an increasingly digital way of working and supporting people heightens the risk of exclusion for those who are unable or unwilling to engage in this way. Services that can only be accessed on-line risk exclusion of those who lack the relevant devices, are unable to afford mobile data or internet access, or who lack the skills, knowledge, or confidence to go online. It is also the case that practitioners may struggle to access suitable devices and/or the preferred platforms for interaction of the people with whom they are working. Some may find particular means of communication challenging or draining. These are issues that need to be considered during system design. Taking a 'default' route, for example 'digital by default' risks excluding some of the most vulnerable from accessing support when they need it.

● The need to look after ourselves and colleagues as well as those being supported

This particular issue came strongly to the fore after the final presentation which highlighted that many of the peer support mechanisms which occur naturally within a shared workspace are undermined by the moves to more remote working. People feel pressured to be available, have no time to 'decompress' and adjust on the journey from work to home or from a meeting back to the office, and have no colleague at the next desk with whom to discuss issues or to offer a sympathetic ear.

Attendees discussed feelings of exhaustion with the extensive use of digital forms of communication, such as virtual meetings, being seen as a key contributing factor. Aspects of looking after the needs of practitioners as human beings risk being undermined, which may be a particular challenge for recently qualified social workers, especially those who qualified during the pandemic, who are finding their way in this changed working world.

PROJECT PRESENTATIONS

“The human rights implications of reported practice on social workers’ use of digital communications technologies with Disabled service users: emerging findings from a user-led study”

Presented by Roxane Lavanchy

**On behalf of Roxane Lavanchy, Shani Minogue, Tom Fadden, and Sophie Sarre.
King’s College London, Shaping our Lives and BASW.**

Funded by the NIHR’s School for Social Care Research (P183).
Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR, SSCR
or the Department of Health and Social Care.

This presentation focused on a user-led project exploring three articles from the United Nations’ [Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD) and the ways in which the use of Digital Communication Technologies (DCTs) by social workers relate to these articles. The three articles in question were Articles 21, 9(1) and 9(2). For the purposes of the project DCTs are understood to be technology that allows two-way communication in both real time and in sequence. This therefore covers platforms such as Zoom and Teams, video and phone calls, but also emails, texts and WhatsApp messaging.

The project was conducted by a team of six Disabled lay researchers who received training, support and mentoring to conduct semi-structured interviews, using a range of methods of communication, with disabled adult users of social work services and social workers.

The approach was underpinned by the social model of disability which highlights the ways in which society creates barriers to the full participation of Disabled people and states that the onus should not be upon Disabled people to remove such barriers. The UK is a signatory to the UNCRPD which came into force in 2008. So what were the findings of the project with respect to these key articles relating to choice, equal access, training and guidance regarding accountability?

Regarding choice, whilst most of the social workers interviewed reported offering choice, those accessing services rarely reported receiving choice and when they did it was often restricted or nominal. It was recognised that sometimes restrictions are applied to social workers, for example by an employer, which can impact the level of choice they are able to offer. When it came to accessing communications and information on an equal basis, Disabled people emphasised the need for two-way communications rather than establishing a one-way transmission of information, with a reminder that there was more to accessibility than accessible formats and a person with a particular impairment automatically receiving a particular format. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach that can be adopted. For

example, a person may have more than one impairment, not all of which are visible, so assumptions cannot be made about their needs.

A breakdown of the advantages and disadvantages of different digital communication methods as experienced by participants and the suitability of different methods for individuals was also presented. Acknowledged barriers for some methods include reliable internet, appropriate hardware, and issues of privacy and confidentiality. It was also recognised that at times DCTs can present barriers to relationship-building and relationality. Particular impairments can interact with DCTs in complex ways.

Article 9 (2) relates to measures for developing and monitoring the implementation of minimum standards and guidelines of accessibility of facilities and services and the provision of training for stakeholders on accessibility issues facing persons with disabilities. Yet none of the social workers interviewed at this time had been provided with any training, although there was a belief some specialist teams had received training and some social workers had sourced training themselves.

Some local authorities had developed their own guidance, for example on on-line consent. But awareness of relevant existing guidance, such as that provided by SCIE, appeared to be lacking. It was felt that training and guidance would be of real benefit, covering issues such as ethics, social work values, professional standards, practical issues (such as different assistive technologies) and the challenges and opportunities of different DCTs for people with different disabilities and impairments, in order to make the use of DCTs meaningful.

Some local authorities restrict the use of some forms of DCT, and many insist on using encryption software that makes access difficult or impossible for many Disabled people. Thus, current social work practice is not offering a meaningful choice - Disabled users of services are not always given the opportunity to receive and impart information and ideas via the form of

communication of their choice. This is resulting in a negative impact on the experiences of Disabled users of services and difficulties enacting core social work values.

In the subsequent discussion, the question of the relative impact of resources and reluctance to change was raised, with it being felt that there was a combination of these two factors at play in the lack of provision of choice. It was suggested that where restrictions were in place, users of services should be made aware of the actual level of choice available. The importance of not making assumptions was also raised, for example the assumption that an older person will not want to or will not be able to use DCTs. So too was the role of flexibility, recognising that different DCTs may be suitable and appropriate at different times, rather than using one method of communication for everything. Positive examples of relationships being transformed by the use of DCTs during lockdowns were also offered.

The practice guidance and other outputs produced as a result of this project are available [here](#)

“Understanding and using social care experiences to support the public and inform policy and service provision: plans for a new platform, Socialcaretalk.org”

Presented by Professor Sue Ziebland (Oxford University) and Professor Fiona Stevenson (UCL, DIPEX)

This presentation focused upon the development of the Socialcaretalk.org platform as a resource for anyone interested in experiences of social care. The platform’s development draws upon a sister platform, Healthtalk.org., which is a website sharing experiences of healthcare. The content of the platforms is underpinned by qualitative research, with experiences being gathered and analysed by researchers and presented using a range of methods including audio and video extracts as well as animations. The collection is based upon robust qualitative studies. The content can be used for multiple purposes including service improvement, as teaching aids, to pass on practical tips and to inform future research. Healthtalk.org was launched in 2001 and contains over 110 condition-specific sections, each based on the analysis of at least 40 interviews, conducted by researchers who have been trained in the same methods.

Developing the social care platform has entailed gathering accounts of experiences of social care, with a focus on engaging seldom-heard groups. The idea for the project developed from discussions among the three NIHR schools on improving integration of research between them where the question arose of why there was no social care equivalent of Healthtalk.org. A formative evaluation followed, creating a draft version of the website to be used with individuals and groups as a basis for discussing what the platform could do and how the content could be used. Subsequently, the curation of content for different user groups and audiences was considered, as the same content could be presented in different ways according to the interests of those visiting the site, for example, members of the public, service providers, researchers, policymakers and educators.

DIPEX is a charity dedicated to sharing people’s experiences of health and care and is the host and publisher of the websites. By presenting people’s experiences, the hope is that others can be helped to either understand their own experiences or think about the experiences of others. Hosting by the charity allows enduring access to the material. It is hoped that Socialcaretalk.org will follow the success of Healthtalk.org which receives around 7 million unique visits a year and is increasingly being used in clinical schools as a teaching aid. The team emphasised the rigorous nature of consent ethics for the project which gives participants power over how the material is used. Consent is sought again before any material is published on the basis that participants do not know in advance what they will say in the interview or would prefer not to have their own voice published.

<https://healthtalk.org>

<https://socialcaretalk.org>

“Social Work and Artificial Intelligence: What have we learnt so far?”

**Presented by Dr Calum Webb (Sheffield University) and
Dr Rosanne Palmer (BASW)**

Funded by the ESRC Impact Accelerator and BASW

The intention of this project was to create a space for discussion between the people developing these technologies, social workers and people with lived experience. When it comes to discussions around Artificial Intelligence (AI), much of the literature and media coverage to date has focused upon either extreme or hypothetical approaches in areas like children’s services, but AI is an umbrella term covering a range of different technologies and approaches to learning from data.

Dr Calum Webb and Dr Claire Cunnington of the University of Sheffield co-hosted with BASW a series of small workshops bringing together participants from different backgrounds to explore the potential and the pitfalls, using the extreme ends of hypothetical and real scenarios to stimulate an unstructured exchange of perspectives. The findings from the workshops were further supported by a literature review and a mapping exercise placing developments in the context of BASW’s Code of Ethics.

One of the key objectives of this discussion was to consider the impact of specific policy conditions and contexts and the way in which these (can) change how acceptable or problematic the use of AI is, rather than debating the general ethics or effectiveness of these systems which has been done elsewhere. Instead of seeking to provide a single answer as to what should and shouldn’t be used, where, when and to what extent, the focus was upon the contextual factors that make the use of AI more or less contentious, whilst acknowledging that no AI systems may be compatible with either BASW’s code of ethics or with social work as an ethics, human rights and relationship-based profession.

A key prompt for this discussion is the acknowledgement that the issue of AI is

increasingly difficult to avoid or ignore and its use, or proposed use, is greeted with nervousness and opposition. However, if arguments against the use of AI are to be made, and made effectively, there is a need to understand what is being opposed and on what basis, which opens up significant questions for discussion.

There is a lot of variation in what forms of AI are being used and how, presenting a challenge in how to respond. This raises the question of what is meant by AI. Dr Webb described it as “...a term broadly used to describe when machines use information usually given to them or ... in their environment to inform some actions or achieve some task...being able to mimic at least some of the rational thinking processes that humans can do.” Examples include:

- Being able to spot and describe a repeating pattern
- Using information about past experiences to make predictions about what will happen in the future
- Using environmental information to inform a decision

To achieve this, machine learning based AI create predictions using complex models. It is usually these machine learning based systems, using environmental data, that are being

referenced when discussing any use of AI in children's services. This could involve linked data from different services about a child, and possibly also their parents, and trying to predict an outcome that is not known based on what has happened to other children with similar characteristics. Some academic research operates in a similar way, trying to find out which variables make particular outcomes more or less likely. However, the academic research is usually more concerned with which variables are associated with different outcomes and patterns in the wider population, than with being able to predict a specific individual's likelihood of a given outcome with a high level of accuracy.

The use of predictive analytics can differ widely, from completely automated decision-making – often the source of most controversy – to 'human in the loop' approaches – where some elements are automated, but any recommendations are finalised by a human actor – to purely informative or descriptive functions, feeding additional data or predictions into decision-making processes. Participants in the workshops were able to identify problems and potentials in all of these types of implementation.

During the workshop discussions, the following key themes and questions emerged:

- Scale: how invasive is the use of AI? How many decisions does it play a role in? How many people does it affect?

At one end of the spectrum, social workers do not have access to linked data and have to provide explicit legal justification to gain access. At the other end, data from everyone known to a local authority could be used in every single decision, including sensitive data a person might not want seen by a social worker, with no form of opt-out or challenge. There are thus questions around whether data is only used for some decisions, whether it's used with parental licence, whether the process was designed in a participatory way and how oversight is provided and by whom.

- Stakes: how important is the decision being made? How important is it that a human is deciding this rather than a machine?

The importance of being treated with respect and dignity resonated here.

With regard to what is at stake, key questions emerged around the degree of 'automated-ness' and whether any form of meaningful challenge is available.

- Context: innocent-seeming applications can present risk in the wrong context.

In terms of context, information that is in principle around offering support only works if there is resource to offer support. If a system recommends a family receives support, and that support is not available, the system may become oppressive: pulling a family into a greater level of surveillance without providing meaningful support. This also applies with regard to inequalities. For example, in the context of the last decade and a half or so, much of the provision of support for children and families falls short of meeting the aspirations of the profession and the rights of children. A predictive model cannot inform a social worker about a family's entitlements to support, only whether similar families received support. Models based on data from a period of austerity, where support is highly rationed or unequally provided, risk normalising a restrictive or inequitable provision of family support.

The final question for consideration was more speculative. What does it mean for a person to have a social worker in a state where decisions in more and more services – benefits entitlements, unemployment support, housing services – are informed or delivered by AI? AI is unlikely to make decisions in these spheres more empathetic. For better or worse, those people for whom the benefits, education, criminal justice, housing, and health systems fail most acutely tend to find themselves in contact with social work sooner or later. Social workers may be some of the few professionals positioned to give a human challenge to decisions made in other parts of the welfare state. It was noted during the discussion that it is often the human element which people feel distinguishes good interactions with social workers from bad ones. Could social workers be the 'humans in the loop' in the increasingly data-driven and automated welfare state of the information age, ensuring decisions are challenged when they cause harm, or erode a person's rights and entitlements? More importantly, does the profession want such a role?

"Social Work, Systems Thinking and Digital Technology"

Presented by Professor Rick Hood, Kingston University London

This presentation focused upon the findings of a research project from 2020 which looked at work systems in people-centred services, including GP surgeries, adult social care, housing support and care leavers' services. With regard to the emerging evidence base around 'digital social work', it was pointed out that practice is hybrid and that it is not necessarily helpful to think about social work taking place by digital means as virtual, but rather as interactions mediated by digital technology.

Even prior to the pandemic, digital modes were emerging in social work, a trend that was then accelerated by the pandemic. This can create anxiety about how this impacts on a person's work, for example, whether a risk assessment can be done properly. However, the use of digital can also help to establish rapport and build trust, helping to understand what matters to people. There remain, though, justified concerns about inequalities and digital exclusion.

Professor Hood noted that we can talk about different types of system but that this project focused upon 'work systems', defined as:

"... a system in which human participants and/or machines perform work (processes and activities) using information technology and other resources to produce specific products and/or services for specific internal and/or external customers." (Alter, 2008; cited in Wastell, 2011: p10).

Such work systems can be broad or narrow. The project considered the types of questions that might be relevant in designing a work system and incorporating various kinds of technologies. For example, how quickly are the issues that matter to people being understood and how quickly is support put in place to address these issues? How will we know if what matters from the point of view of those receiving services has been addressed, rather than meeting targets? Such questions, and their answers, have implications for design.

A different series of questions could be used in relation to designing the same system, for example: What information should people be giving to us? How can we screen for eligibility? How can we match people to what we have to offer? How can we manage demand and control cost? These questions are underpinned by a completely different set of assumptions. The two sets of questions, about the same work system, lead to very different kinds of design, and therefore different ways in which technology is incorporated into that design.

Reflecting on the experience of the Integrated Children's System (ICS) as an example, a number of warning signs within the design process were highlighted, including a flawed assumption that social workers were not doing basic practice tasks and this was a root cause of practice failures, and that these failings could be remedied by a computer system. The design was led by a government steering group that included neither social workers nor people with lived experience. The system was found to be unfit for purpose from the start, although the problems were ignored or blamed on other factors, until eventually most of it was adapted or scrapped. ICS represents a warning when digital or technological solutions are advocated to solve practice problems.

Also problematic is the idea of saying practice should be anything 'by default', for example 'digital by default', rather than starting with

the purpose from the point of view of those using it. Imposing a default pathway leads to increased demand as more people make contact because the digital service is not helping them get what they want (John Seddon). Seeing something as 'inevitable' means there are vested interests in these things working which leads to signals around effectiveness being ignored. Alternatively, problems are portrayed as people resisting change.

Starting from these points leads to huge rises in 'failure demand', the demand created in a system because of a failure to get things right for people. IT alone cannot free up this capacity. It's an issue of service design. The problems experienced with digital services often reflect underlying problems of design, even though social workers or other agencies may be blamed.

The development of the concept of, and literature around, socio-technical design reflects an experience in the mining industry where the standard hierarchical supervised practice could not be used at the site and instead miners worked in relatively autonomous groups with a minimum of supervision. The result? Accidents down, morale up and much higher productivity. Socio-technical design turned a complex interaction between people, technology and the environment into design principles with self-regulating groups, made up of individuals who are encouraged to develop multiple skills and use their discretion, creating greater adaptability in the face of a range of situations.

One implication for design was that information needed to flow to the front line first as opposed to the standard practice of information being seen as needing to go to management first where it is turned into prescription which goes to those carrying it out whose compliance is monitored. There is far greater decentralisation in a socio-technical design approach where managerial focus is on system performance and there are clear objectives but with freedom and capability to find out what works best for the

situations being faced. Technology then follows the design.

These principles were then used to conduct action research studying design in 'people-centred services'. A group of managers and commissioners did a shortened course on the Vanguard method¹ at Kingston then a study of a work system in their own organisation. Very different kinds of agencies had converged on very similar kinds of design:

- A 'front door' approach – with concern about demand being too high and a focus on information gathering and triage
- An assumption that efficiency meant specialisation – leading to multiple contacts, handovers and assessments
- A basic model of 'screen and intervene' – with rapid responses in cases of crisis
- Intake viewed as a routinised activity – with contextual demand overlooked and a superficial impression of what was needed, risking subsequent escalation of needs.

It was argued that people appear to converge on this kind of design because of the need to ration demand, yet the volume of failure demand suggests capacity to do things differently if a re-design focuses on what matters to people at the point they engage. Digital technology won't redeem an ineffective design. Design has to come in first, with technology put in last.

The fundamentals of social work practice do not change and there are ways in which digital tools can support social workers to carry out virtual tasks and maintain requisite variety. Standardisation risks increased demand – and costs. There needs to be enough variety in practice to deal with the variety of demand.

Full article: [New development: Using the Vanguard Method to explore demand and performance in people-centred services](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13632539.2017.1380000) (tandfonline.com)

¹ The 'Vanguard method' is an approach to systems re-design that seeks to build the system around the individuals rather than the other way round.

“Rights to safe and healthy working conditions, privacy and participation: emerging themes in research on agile and remote working in children’s safeguarding social work”

**Presented by Dr Dharman Jeyasingham and
Josh Devlin (University of Manchester)**

Funded by the ESRC

This presentation reported on some interim findings from a project which recognised that a lot of remote and agile working depends on social workers engaging in new ways with digital technology. Themes in the emerging findings included human rights around people’s safety at work, privacy for social workers and privacy for young people and families that use services.

Agile working often refers to the use of large open-plan offices and hot-desking. More recently there has been a move to working away from offices, much more so during the Covid-19 pandemic. Two ideas from the management and business literature were introduced concerning organisational agility, understood as organisations increasingly structured to permit connection, collaboration and responsiveness (Gratton, 2014) and workforce agility, understood as flexibility of roles, place and time of work, enabled by digital technology in order to meet service demands more effectively and cheaply (Cannon, 2017). These feed into discussions about how organisations need to be organised to work in ways that promote connection and collaboration.

In recent decades, there has been a government emphasis on adopting agile approaches, with the idea that we should be working in organisations that have more flexible horizontal structures that enable more communication and collaboration between people in the organisation and outside. Also relevant is the idea that organisations need to be more responsive to change. One way to achieve greater workforce agility is to reduce the number of employees and contract out as has happened in the public sector. There have also been higher expectations around worker flexibility

in terms of where people work and the times and days they work, changes that can be enabled by digital technology. Such forms of flexibility are not aimed at meeting workers’ needs, but enabling services to be more effective, responsive and cheaper.

Since the late 2000s, ideas about changing workspaces have been adopted in local authorities, for example co-location of teams and services and expectations of working in a more flexible way. As of 2020, there has been a shift towards new transformation of office spaces, as most workers were not in the office most of the time. Both changes also have an element of saving money. Social workers are also using more digital devices and platforms.

There have been diverse experiences of this shift. Most project participants saw some benefits such as having more control and being able to work more autonomously. Conversely, others felt they had less control over both their work and its impact on their lives as well as additional individual responsibility.

To date, some of the key themes researched in the use of digital technology in children’s social work have included research about ICS and information systems, information management technology pushing towards

managing information rather than relationships, and AI machine learning and its influence in practice. This project includes practitioners' everyday digital practices, not just recording and emails but also the media that people using services want to use. There is evidence that social workers are making decisions about what kind of technology to use based on the kinds of interactions they are seeking and how experiences and practices during lockdown and social distancing saw digital technology used to manage the barriers created.

The project focused on the following questions:

- What are service leaders' expectations of agile approaches?
- What are practitioners' everyday practices and experiences?
- What are young people's experiences of social workers' practice, communication and the use of digital devices?

This presentation focuses on the initial findings of the second strand of work on practitioners' everyday practices and experiences. The researchers were working with three local authorities in different parts of England, talking to practitioners over the course of a year about different aspects of their work, observing communication practices, having participants keep diaries and analysing workspaces.

Three broad overlapping areas were identified in relation to rights:

- The right to safe and healthy working conditions
- The right to privacy of practitioners, young people and families
- Rights in relation to increased participation and increased exclusion of young people and families in social work practice

Some examples of more detailed findings include the move to home working raising issues in relation to access and equality on the basis of disability for social workers, for example the challenge of increased reliance on text-based communications for practitioners with dyslexia and practitioners with a diagnosis of autism finding the shift to

virtual meetings draining and challenging. Feelings of exhaustion due to remote communication were shared by many practitioners with or without a diagnosed impairment.

It was also argued that the challenges of home working have tended to discriminate against younger and/or early career social workers. For example, they are more likely to be in shared accommodation, making it harder to maintain a stable and private workspace. Home working was also seen as changing the nature of opportunities for learning and supervision, with a more formal and planned format leading to less variety in interactions and less opportunity to observe colleagues, whether through shadowing or incidental learning in the workplace.

However, some found ways to develop new opportunities for supervision such as seeking guidance or mentoring independently. This was linked to available social capital, being easier for those who had been in a local authority or with a team for longer and thus having established relationships. Less experienced staff or those newer to a team need a wider range of support from colleagues which was seen as much harder to achieve on-line.

Some participants found that agile working gave them more control over how they work, with greater flexibility. This was experienced differently by different practitioners, with more experienced and/or confident social workers demonstrating greater agency and the less experienced feeling more pressure to work for longer.

With regard to privacy, shifts to agile or remote working brought work and non-work lives much closer together. For some, work life has intruded in ways that were felt to be unmanageable, such as the need to protect their own children from the emotional complexity of their practice. There were also challenges in ensuring the privacy of those being supported when a practitioner's own family members were around. Others found maintaining boundaries less difficult, for example by creating a separate space to work or establishing routines to make the transition into and out of work. Again, it was reported

that it tended to be more experienced and confident practitioners who found this easier.

As practitioners increasingly became office-based once more, meetings continued to take place virtually, with it often being difficult to find private space from which to join meetings, causing disruption and putting confidentiality at risk. Participants even reported joining meetings from parked cars.

The shift in ways of working both creates new opportunities for, and complicates, the participation of children and families in social work practice. It allows for more diverse forms of communication, for example, the use of WhatsApp which is seen as low cost and accessible. Different forms of communication may be viewed as less intrusive and as helpful to those who might be anxious on the phone. Social workers reported text communication as a positive, allowing contact to be maintained and to promote relationships within a busy work schedule. Video calls can also facilitate relationships, but as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, in-person interactions and as a way of allowing greater flexibility. Social work participants still felt more sensitive topics were best discussed in person. On-line interactions can be less engaging and reliable, for example when parents join virtual multi-agency meetings.

It was also recognised that virtual interactions between professionals can be more complex and are complicated by digital technology, for example, it being more difficult to manage interruptions such as incoming emails and the temptation to multi-task.

Digital communications are now ubiquitous in social work practice, with an impact on all interactions between young people, families and practitioners. So for example if practitioners become less engaged in a virtual meeting through multi-tasking, this impacts on parents. This shift requires new, tacit skills, with some practitioners being better at such skills, or more confident in their use, than others. There are considerations as to which platforms are most appropriate.

There are different interpretations of hybrid practice currently in use, with Ferguson et al denoting a combination of in-person and on-line interactions taking place over time, but there are also hybrid meetings with a simultaneous combination of in-person and on-line interactions. There is a complexity to digital practices, and these have not yet settled within social work, as hybrid practices have developed without planning, especially during the pandemic.

In the ensuing discussion, it was noted that this project had been planned pre-pandemic. Yet notwithstanding the pandemic, there were growing expectations of changing work practices at an organisational level. Whilst initial findings on practitioner perspectives had been presented, fieldwork with young people and families was still taking place.

Changes in working patterns were also discussed, such as a perceived increase in the booking of back-to-back meetings when these are being held virtually. The project leads reported evidence from diary observation that people are doing more meetings and that role intensity and monotony was being increased by the way technology was being used. For practitioners, digital technologies were not considered to afford the same level of sensitivity in areas such as informal peer support. Also some practitioners had received training about communication skills using video technology, but this was inconsistent.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

'Technological capital' is not just about the hard infrastructure of devices, systems and platforms. There is also an element of skills that are learned through using them. Not being in a position to do so can lead to digital exclusion. There are also ways of using technology that can impact on people's privacy, from a family member unexpectedly entering the room during a video call or a virtual meeting, to the sharing of data on individuals without their consent or even, in some instances perhaps, their knowing.

The use of digital technology in social work raises questions about how you engage with people, a key component of the profession. It also throws up questions about who is – and who should be – engaged with the design and development of the systems that support services, at what point and how. Use of digital technology can increase the flexibility to tailor communication so that preferred methods of communication can be used, helping to build trust and confidence. Every technology, every platform will work well for some and not so well for others. Yet restrictions on such flexibility can be created by the lack of a device or a local authority not allowing access to a particular platform.

It is of no surprise to those in social work that context matters. Digital technology can be used in ways that support and facilitate relationship-building and it can also be used to enhance convenience. Yet there are also tasks and contexts where its use may be inappropriate or even harmful. If the profession can ask questions about where digital technology adds value and where caution is needed, it will find itself in a better position to debate with decision-makers and commissioners about the decisions they face and the underlying assumptions shaping that way of thinking, in order to help digital technology be deployed in a way that enhances people's experiences of social work rather than undermining their rights, removing the human element and the ability to deliver the outcomes sought.



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