SAFEGUARDING SOCIETIES' GUARDIANS

A just society that enables and supports the most vulnerable members of its community is the principled challenge taken on by Social Workers, shown to have a positive impact on crime rates, health statistics, school attendance and employment. Maintaining and delivering high quality social care through supporting and training staff is an ongoing challenge for local authorities, the NHS and charities, whilst the frontline Social Workers are also tasked to evidence continuing professional development (CPD). The challenge, which ultimately rewards all of society, has been exasperated through coronavirus, which appears to have both compounded community hardships whilst impacting the quality of care that can be delivered.

Covid-19 impact

According to Community Care research, the majority of Social Workers believe that Covid-19 has adversely impacted care delivery. For those in direct contact with the people they support, there has been anxiety because of potential infection risk and challenges with PPE availability. However, most Social Workers believe their employers have responded well to the crisis. Suspension of some face-to-face services has not stopped Social Workers from finding innovative ways to connect with children and their families virtually. According to a report by BASW, using conference calls can reduce time spent commuting and increase contact with both fellow professionals and families. However, virtual visits can never fully replicate the empirical sight and smell assessment of a home visit with around 50% of Social Workers reporting virtual contact inappropriate. Key concerns include confidentiality around who controls and joins the call, against a backdrop of a rise in cases such as domestic abuse.

Continuing Professional Development

CPD enables social workers to improve their practice through reflection of learning activities and helps to raise professional standards. However, Social Work England, found that only 18% of social workers had recorded CPD four-and-a-half months out from a November deadline, failure to do so would risk removal from the register. Whilst the benefits of reflective practice are clear, with only 2.5% of around 100,000 registered Social Workers documented evidence audited, CPD can be seen as a bureaucratic burden during an increased workload. A Community Care report calls for more meaningful peer to peer presentations and feedback where colleagues could report on truly reflective CPD taking place. The concern over CPD appears well founded, with Social Work England rescinding the removal of 5000 practitioners from the main register in December on a temporary registration basis. However, they were asked to complete CPD as a part of the application to restore thier name in the main register.



Photo: by Mike/Adobe Stock seen in Community Care

Recruitment, Training and Retention

Pre-pandemic a majority of Social Workers reported being happy with the level of training opportunities according to a Community Care survey. However, there was a mixed response to the quality of training delivered with face-to-face and off-site training being much more highly rated than online training. Significantly, around 75% of Social Workers reported not having a career development plan and an even higher percentage listing professional development as a key factor in deciding whether to stay with their current employer. In the wake of Covid-19 a third of workers are considering leaving the profession altogether. A Social Workers Union survey has found lack of support and supervision that is compounded by increased workloads, social isolation and anxieties around coronavirus. BASW Cymru proposes Social Workers are provided with more (group) training webinars, digital resources and a safe space to connect with fellow professionals. For students, the biggest impact of coronavirus has been on placements, at a time when the need to recruit has never been higher, many placements have been suspended, interrupted or deferred over student safety and support concerns (Community Care). In response education providers are permitted to vary requirements such as number of observations required and move more teaching online. However, maximising learning experiences, when it's safe to do, is vital to train and grow our much needed Social Workers. In the meantime previously registered Social Workers have been invited to return to practice.

Challenge and opportunity

The pandemic has increased the workload on our Social Workers and whilst the use of technology provides benefits, some face-to-face interaction is still essential. The value of CPD is also clear, but there is a call to move to more peer to peer reflective learning. Developing our indispensable Social Workers, through support and supervision, for all of society's benefit, has never been more vital.

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