What does the COVID-19 crisis mean for the future of children's social care?

LISTENING TO PRACTITIONERS

The children's social care sector has been forced to change the way it works in response to the COVID-19 crisis. For some frontline practitioners, this has been a chance to start operating in ways that prioritise relationships with children and families, and enable social workers to do their best work. For others however, this crisis has held up a mirror in front of the sector, exposing the erosive effects of increased bureaucracy and the mistrust of social workers that underpins it.

The Centre for Public Impact UK (CPI UK) worked with hundreds of practitioners in 2019 to develop a blueprint for children's social care. Launched in November, the blueprint put forward a vision of a different kind of system; one designed by social workers, with children and families at the heart. It demonstrates that time with children and families could be increased by 60%, and a system that enabled this would cost no more for a local authority to deliver. After the blueprint's launch, many local authorities showed real interest and commitment to translating its ideas into reality.

But then COVID-19 hit. So we asked practitioners who collaborated with us to write the blueprint to share what they have learned throughout this crisis, and their hopes for the future. **We wanted to reflect together on whether the principles that are central to the blueprint – prioritising relationships with families and children, and giving social workers the autonomy to do their best work – still felt like the right direction to aim for, and what this crisis has taught practitioners about the future of children's social care.**

The following note outlines what practitioners – including social workers, team managers, practice supervisors and others – around the country told us.

Many practitioners have seen light in what could have been very dark times

- **This crisis has further revealed the importance of relationships between social workers and families.** Relationships have always been key to good social work, and this has been re-emphasised during COVID-19. There are different accounts on how relationships with families have been affected, but all practitioners stressed the importance of developing a strong bond with children and families. Snapshots of what we heard include:

  - Strong existing relationships have proven to be key in supporting families through these tough times: *"My existing relationships have been so important to understanding how to help families now"* – Social Worker

  - Social distancing and other COVID-19 restrictions have made it harder to build new relationships with children and families if they did not previously exist: *"Phone and video calls sometimes make it hard to really figure out what is going on for a child, especially if you don't understand them well"* – Social Worker

  - In some cases, social workers found that the quality of relationships have improved during this time. Many said this was a result of families' positive responses to engaging via different technologies, families having more compassion towards social workers, and social workers being able to spend more time with children and families: *"Families have shown a lot more compassion for what social workers are trying to do. I guess it's the appreciation that we are all in this together"* – Team Manager

- **Some social workers have been able to experiment with different ways of engaging with families and dedicate more time to direct work.** Many practitioners have appreciated the flexible working arrangements forced by COVID-19, including not having to be in the office 9am-5pm, and using new technologies to keep in touch with families and other team members. For those with adequate space, using home as a base has enabled greater focus and minimal distractions, giving them the ability to plan their work better. Many practitioners also expressed that an overall reduction in travel between visits has meant they have more time. This has resulted in having more opportunity to try creative solutions to engage families, and being more intentional about choices of how to make support bespoke to families' needs: *"Some families loved that we brought the*

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>
> – Team Manager

> " *I don't have to go to the house when visits have been more stressful for mum in the past than productive. I can call for a chat which is less intrusive for her and I find better for our relationship and understanding what is really going on"*
>
> – Social Worker

meeting technology to their own homes. Children could take part in the conversations too, kind of a shift in power" – Consultant Social Worker

- **Many social workers have been blown away at how resourceful families have been throughout this tough time.** Initially, the reaction to the crisis was to consider how to increase support for families, which caused anxieties within local authorities. The virus placed a huge amount of strain on families, and the effects are beginning to be more visible now. However, in some cases social workers have found that families have responded more positively than expected. Many have accessed community resources without social care referrals, supported each other's emotional wellbeing more so than before, built a sense of solidarity within the family unit, and adapted to manage financially even when jobs have been lost: *"The resourcefulness of some families has blown me away. I think we should dig deeper to understand how to sustain that resourcefulness, not just in tough times"* – Team Manager

- **Community organisations and schools have played a key role in supporting families.** *"Mutual aid groups, churches and mosques etc. have played a big role in supporting our vulnerable families during this time. As professional services shut down, we started working more with community groups to support families. This has helped families get to know the support available on their estate or within their ward."* – Team Manager. Stronger local connections to organisations and services have enabled many families to better understand the local services available and expand their support options. Many practitioners also talked about how local schools have stepped up, unleashing potential for greater collaboration between them and children's social care. Many schools have played a more active role in ensuring the safety of children. This has led to many schools developing a better understanding of risk, having a far more intelligent picture of the children in their school who need social care support, and gaining a deeper understanding of what children's social work actually does.

- **Finally, social workers emphasised the importance of supportive leadership, as well as peer groups, throughout this time.** Leaders who acted quickly and gave clear guidance at moments of uncertainty gave social workers the confidence to approach risk and support families. One practitioner spoke about her appreciation for

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> *The resourcefulness of some families has blown me away. I think we should dig deeper to understand how to sustain that resourcefulness, not just in tough times"*
>
> – Social Worker

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> *Schools have a big role to play in whatever we do in the future"*
>
> – Social Worker

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> *Where managers and leaders have been really helpful is helping to contain the ripple effects of the crisis and make me and my team feel safe in it"*
>
> – Team Leader

her Director of Children's Services' daily communication about key issues, and guidance for how to manage her work, but also her physical and mental health, during this tricky time. Where leadership didn't give this type of guidance and support, social workers have felt worried and overwhelmed by the constantly changing nature of the situation. Team solidarity has also played a big role in making social workers feel supported at this time. For example, team check-ins have increased and team members have increasingly turned to one another for case consultation: *"I have seen an increasing sense of solidarity and collaboration between teams, we simply trust each other more"* – Social Worker.

Bureaucracy and process: the stubborn challenges that remain

- **In some cases, anxiety from the crisis has resulted in a more 'command and control' approach to management, reinforcing the distrust towards social workers that was already felt before the crisis.** While some social workers were given the chance to work flexibly and spend more time doing direct work with children and families, others felt they have been managed more tightly than ever. This has made it harder for those that felt this way to support families and children at a critical time and use their creativity and resourcefulness: *"There's been a lot of anxiety at all levels of the system. It's good to be worried about the risk a child could be in, but to constantly worry about social workers' ability to prevent harm, and to try and manage them into doing better jobs, just increases the level of anxiety. This prevents them from being able to do their jobs well"* – Practice Supervisor.

- **There has also been noticeable attempts to increase bureaucracy and process .** *"There has been request after request from management to do things we would never normally do. It seems to me the focus is not on the data we actually need."* – Social Worker. The majority of practitioners spoke about an increased number of requests from the Department for Education, as well as from management in their local authorities. Many have had to fill additional weekly spreadsheets to check which families social workers have spoken to. This adds to an already burdensome reporting system, with many practitioners feeling unsure about the purpose of collecting this data: *"The council are now saying 'we need this and this etc.' and it's always in multiple formats to suit their purpose. The frustrating thing is I have done my job and I know what the situation is"* – Social Worker.

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> *Bureaucracy is very comforting at times of anxiety"*
> – Practice Supervisor

- **This crisis has reinforced the need for a more dynamic way to assess risk, rooted in the lived experience of the child.** Many renewed risk assessments – namely <u>RAG (red, amber, green) ratings</u> – assess the impact of COVID-19 on families and existing vulnerabilities.

These have created an additional snapshot of risk that has sometimes contradicted previous assessments. We heard a mix of views on how helpful doing these assessments have been. Some social workers said that it has helped update their understanding of risk to a child and made them think afresh over what support was really required: *"We redid our risk assessment which made ourselves rethink: maybe a family doesn't need that and actually it was proving detrimental…"* – Consultant Social Worker. However, others thought that whilst RAG rating may have brought comfort, the efficacy of any desktop risk assessment in social work is questionable, and in places these ratings have confused, undermined and overridden social workers' perspective on what the child and family need. Regardless, a clear message from all practitioners was the need to have a more dynamic, iterative approach to assessing risk so that it reflects the lived experience of the child.

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> *Risk isn't fixed, it's fluid. Our understanding of risk therefore also needs to be just that"*
> – Principal Social Worker

What's next: a choice between trying to return to 'normal', or adapting forward

These past months have given crucial information about how the children's social care sector can adapt, as well as what families need to feel supported. **The sector now faces a choice, which will shape the future of children's social care: to learn from how the sector adapted to the crisis and build forward, or simply go back to how things were before**. Many practitioners are worried that this unique opportunity to reimagine the system could be wasted, and that the temptation to return to old practices will be too strong.

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> *My worry is that the willingness to learn from this might be limited. We might want to forget this crisis ever happened"*
> – Social Worker

But it doesn't have to be this way. **Leaders in the sector face important choices in the coming months, which can ensure that practices and structures are adapted based on the learning from this crisis.** This could result in improved outcomes for families, children and practitioners alike, injecting a new wave of positive energy in the sector. To adapt forward, leaders and practitioners can:

(1) **Build on the energy and creativity of social workers rather than doubling down on control.** *"I am worried when we come out of this that leaders will be anxious and want to get a grip, rather than listen to what has worked for us"* – Social Worker. Social workers have shown that they can do amazing work when given the right space and time, and when trusted. Many managers and local authority leaders spoke about the outstanding professionalism and commitment of their staff during this crisis. Trust

can become the new normal, with managers focusing on enabling social workers, rather than imposing micro management structures.

(2) **Empower social workers to continually define and deliver what support families need, rather than relying on rigid standardised assessments and out of the box services.** Many practitioners have seen what families actually need and don't need, and how important a fluid understanding of risk is. This has raised questions about how to get a more dynamic, iterative approach to understanding a family's situation, rather than categorising and making static assessments. Social workers should be empowered to find ways to ground their understanding of risk in the lived experience of the child and determine what a family truly needs. Many practitioners spoke about future hope of having the autonomy to deliver more bespoke, holistic services to families – for instance helping with housing solutions or delivering food parcels. Links between the public services one family receives would need to be combined and strengthened to make this a reality. *"I hope that we learn to leave families alone, and only support them in the way they actually need"* – Team Manager.

> "
> *I hope that we learn to leave families alone, and only support them in the way they actually need"*
> – Team Manger

(3) **Embed social care into the fabric of community support rather than undo the good work.** *"I think the most successful interventions in my local authority were community-based and community-wide; for instance the provision of food packages and school meals, young people being given laptops by schools, social workers buying tablets to facilitate virtual visits etc."* – Principal Social Worker. This crisis has shown the benefits for families of a more collaborative approach between social workers, schools and local organisations. Embedding social workers in schools is already being trialled by the Department for Education, but bigger steps can be taken to embed social workers in their communities more broadly by giving them the autonomy to draw connections that can lead to a more dynamic and holistic understanding of a family's situation. Relationships will last longer this way and serve to address isolation of vulnerable families, as well as make safeguarding a more collective responsibility.

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> *The community engagement we have seen should not be lost"*
> – Social Worker

(4) **Foster the tools and ways of working that enable better, more flexible social work, rather than go back to a limited set of options.** *"Investing further in the technology that we have used during the crisis might save us a lot of time and expand our methods of engagement with children and families"* – Social Worker. The sector has already adapted to using new technologies including virtual conferences, WhatsApp with families, and playing online games with children. Many have made work more efficient. Investing in technology now could free up more time for social workers in the future,

and continue to expand their methods of engagement. Remote working has also been a positive experience for many practitioners. Whilst some have expressed desires to return to working in physical teams, giving practitioners more freedom to choose how and where to work can build on the positive experience of flexible working that many have felt during this crisis.

The time for transformative system change is now

Some of these choices won't be easy, but many leaders and practitioners are already pioneering the mindset shift needed to ensure the system works better for children and families. The time for transformative system change is now. The future is daunting and it is likely that demand for children's social services will be on the rise as the effects of this crisis are felt over the long term. Listening to practitioners, it is clear that going back to 'normality' would be a heavy blow to their morale. Many want to build on the different ways of working that they have trialled during COVID-19; ways of working that are more empowering, creative and bespoke to families' needs. For others, this crisis has exacerbated problems of excessive bureaucracy and mistrust, and they want to see change now more than ever.

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> *We cannot miss the opportunity now to do things better in the future"*
> — Practice Supervisor

These conversations have demonstrated that the principles of the blueprint that we designed with practitioners can offer inspiration for what a vision for a future system could look like – one that learns and adapts from crises and prioritises relationships with families and children. It offers a practical path to embedding trust and autonomy in social work so that power to create change is shared.

The sector has shown that it can move mountains and adapt quickly during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis. Sector leaders, local authority leaders and practitioners therefore already have the will and know how to make change. **Now, they need to ensure the sector adapts forward from this crisis and help to create local systems that produce the best possible outcomes for children and families.**

This work would not have been possible without the contribution of the many social workers, consultant social workers, team managers, practice supervisors and local authority leaders who gave their time and energy to speak to us. Thank you to every one of them.

We at CPI UK want to keep this conversation going and help leaders and practitioners shape the future of children's social care. Get in touch to tell us what you think or work with us to explore how to adapt forward as we start to look beyond this crisis.

* the images used throughout this report, show social workers from across the Frontline network

About CPI UK

The Centre for Public Impact UK (CPI UK) is a not-for-profit that helps government and public sector organisations listen, learn and adapt better to prepare for the complex challenges they face. Founded by Boston Consulting Group, we help public sector systems and cultures adapt so that human relationships matter, so that power is shared and decisions are made closer to those impacted, with those impacted.

We do this through our research and fieldwork guiding organisations through the change, through our learning programmes for changemakers that develop their confidence to act and by helping governments to listen better by facilitating new dialogues, especially with those who feel unheard or undervalued. We champion those who advance the world and draw insights from our worldwide network, and others paving the way for positive change.

This work was led by Elena Bagnera, Senior Associate, and Katie Rose, Programme Manager.

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