

# Social Workers and COVID-19

## 1. Practising in the COVID-19 world

Employers should have adequate safeguards in place for social workers so they can continue to provide services and undertake direct work safely in the COVID-19 world. These should include:

- Arrangements for only critical face to face home visits to replace face to face based on risk assessments
- Adequate access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and hand sanitiser;
- Social worker specific PPE guidance which deals with 'just in case' scenarios
- Clear guidance and training on virtual working and suitable electronic communications
- Arrangements to minimise use of public transport through provision of parking permits
- Essential car user allowances for those who have cars and access to dedicated taxis etc for those who do not.

UNISON has agreed joint NJC advice with the Local Government Association for employers and employees in relation to COVID-19. A summary of the guidance agreed can be found on UNISON's website

<https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/local-government/coronavirus-guidance-local-government-workers/>

This includes guidance on home working, risk assessments, social distancing and redeployment.

## 2. Local Authority Statutory Powers for Looked After Children – Scrap SI 445

In April the Department for Education (DfE) [published](#) guidance for local authorities on relaxing statutory duties relating to child protection, safeguarding and care during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The Coronavirus Act did not relax local authority duties for children's social care so there was no legal basis for departing from statutory duties. A statutory instrument laid before Parliament on 23 April removed legal protections and safeguards from children in care and came into force the next day, 24 April. There was no public consultation and no time for Parliamentary scrutiny and debate.

The government says the measures are temporary – expiring on 25 September – to allow overstretched children's services greater flexibility. But there are fears that the coronavirus crisis is being used as an excuse to relax children's social care duties and the expiry date could be revoked.

UNISON has joined the campaign organised by Article 39 calling for:

- The withdrawal of the statutory instrument
- Any proposed changes to the law affecting children genuinely connected to COVID-19 must be transparent about the reasons why and subject to open consultation and parliamentary scrutiny. We understand that timescales may have to be tighter than usual for these democratic processes.

An Article 39 summary of the changes is [here](#).

The emergency legislation not only diminishes the rights of children and important safeguards, it also presents a danger to social workers. Sadly, we know that scapegoating frontline social workers when something goes wrong is not unusual and the emergency legislation would increase the risk of things going wrong and risk being missed.

Branches and members are asked to share with us issues and concerns that are arising so we can collate examples.

### **3. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and home visits**

We continue to receive reports of concerns about personal protective equipment (PPE) and home visits. UNISON has made PPE a top priority. We are pushing the government very hard to ensure all workers have the PPE they need without delay. We are also working with the local government employers to try to ensure this happens.

Only critical face to face home visits should take place face to face during the pandemic, based on risk assessments such as when it is necessary to prevent significant harm and/or to fulfil a statutory duty which cannot be satisfied in any other way. Where at all possible social workers should be contacting people remotely e.g. by telephone or video conferencing to maintain contact, assess and review. We would reasonably expect each employer to provide guidance for social workers on using suitable electronic communications.

Public Health England issued revised guidance on PPE on 1 April 2020, which includes four tables showing the PPE needed settings. The DfE states where social workers and other staff are undertaking home visits, PPE is not required unless the people being visited are symptomatic of COVID-19 or have a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19. Where COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed, those undertaking the visit should use PPE in line with the latest Public Health England guidance. The PHE guidance/tables are not social worker specific and need to be read across. The social work role requires many interactions. **PHE Table 2 Primary, outpatient, and community care (including residential and homecare settings)** This table applies where physical contact is considered a risk such as:

- Where the social worker recognises social distancing may be difficult e.g. people with learning disabilities or young children
- The social worker cannot establish with the people being visited that they cannot reliably communicate if they are symptomatic or have a diagnosis.
- The home visit is without prior discussion with the family/household e.g. emergency safeguarding

In all cases PPE should be based on a risk assessment, in line with NJC guidance. The tables give guidance on which PPE, based on expert advice, is considered necessary. However, it gives practitioners the autonomy to make the decision and there may be additional PPE or other preventive measures that are required.

In situations where employees reasonably believe they are in serious and imminent danger, under section 44 of the Employment Rights Act there are some protections from detriment or dismissal should they decide to leave the workplace. During the COVID-19 emergency, it may be that such a situation could arise. However, members should always speak to their UNISON branch before leaving the workplace under this rule, as this is a complex area of employment law.

#### **4. Social Work Together Campaign**

The Government in conjunction with the Local Government Association and Social Work England have launched the Social Work Together campaign. This is aimed at encouraging former social workers to return to practice to help with local efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign covers the adult and children's workforce and highlights the importance of social work as part of a broader health and social care emergency response

The target audience for the campaign is:

- Former social workers who have left the register within the last two years
- Social workers currently on the register but not working in frontline practice
- People in the wider social care workforce wishing to respond to the appeal

The Social Worker registration body Social Work England (SWE) has temporarily reinstated the registration of 8,000 former social workers who left the profession in the last two years. The Local Government Association has set up a free online platform to connect those offering their expertise to local employers. This can be accessed at [local.gov.uk/social-work-together](https://local.gov.uk/social-work-together)

The emergency registration does not extend to social work students at present.

##### **a. Pay and Conditions**

Each employer will decide the terms and conditions returners and those deployed are employed on. UNISON expects those coming into local government employment under this programme to be on the same pay and

conditions as others in the same role and that NJC advice on risk assessment, social distancing and training must apply. If they returning to social work frontline from a higher paid job in local government, NJC guidance says they should keep the higher rate of pay. See NJC circulars here:

<https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/local-government/coronavirus-guidance-local-government-workers/>

## **b. Pensions**

Although technically the rules for most pension funds indicate that pension payments would need to be reduced in the event of a return to work, local government pension scheme administrators have made it clear that they will not abate pensions in circumstances where you return to work to help deal with the pandemic emergency.

## **c. Retired Members**

UNISON retired members returning to take up these posts should make sure their membership details are up to date in order to ensure they can get protection and advice if needed.

## **5. Professional Registration Issues**

UNISON's Professional Services Unit continues to operate as usual during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring we are there for members on a professional register. Due to travel restrictions, some regulators are making changes to usual procedures. This includes some hearings taking place via video conference.

## **6. Continuing Professional Development**

This is the first year of registration with Social Work England. They are asking social workers to log into their online account and upload one piece of CPD by 30 November. CPD does not mean completion of training courses, although this is one example. Social workers will be thinking about and reflecting on their practice and how it might have changed during COVID-19. This reflection could be used as a piece of CPD.

## **7. Share what's happening**

We continue to put pressure on employers and the government to produce much better arrangements around COVID-19. In order to do this, we need to know what social workers are experiencing on the ground. This will help us to spot trends and get ahead of issues before they become unmanageable. We also want to share good practice.

It's also essential employers and managers listen to their social workers too! Social workers are in the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis and they must feel

supported, valued and heard in the decision-making process. Branches are asked to organise members into groups of workers to channel their views to your employer and to provide feedback to UNISON.

If you become aware of a workplace problem, related to the coronavirus outbreak, or want to share good practice please email a short summary to [g.archer@unison.co.uk](mailto:g.archer@unison.co.uk)

We also have a UNISON social worker stewards contacts list used to exchange views/get feedback on social worker issues. Stewards can join by emailing [g.archer@unison.co.uk](mailto:g.archer@unison.co.uk)