

### Challenges ahead



As things get back to some normality there are still a number of challenges ahead and once more the Advice & Representation Team continue to do a terrific job. I want to take this opportunity to thank A&R for their ongoing hard work and dedication over

the last while. I have been truly inspired by their personal commitment to making a difference to social workers in these unprecedented and challenging times. Such an approach embodies the social work spirit in finding ways to address issues, to do things differently, and to make continuous improvements for members.

SWU membership continues to rise and we look forward to welcoming new members each week. I am delighted that our membership has grown to over 13,500 members. This is indeed a great achievement for all involved with SWU. The challenge ahead for SWU is building on that membership base, working on retention, for SWU to be actively involved with more campaigns and engaging with members. This continues to be a challenging task with only a small but active team; therefore, if you have an interest in being involved with the union then please do let us know. I am particularly pleased that we have managed to recruit people to all the Executive positions with new places being filled after the SWU AGM.

This coming month we have our AGM event and due to the present situation, this will be an online event with the AGM going live

at 2pm on Fri 25<sup>th</sup> Sept. It is your union and a chance for you to share your view on the future and direction of the union. Please do register to be a part of it and say hello. If not, I can always be contacted via email and I look forward to regular correspondence from members.

Finally, and importantly, we have been asked a lot as to why social workers were not included in the public sector pay rise announcement. Most public sector social workers are paid by local authorities, who get their funding from a combination of local business rates, council taxes, fees/fines for local services and government grants. While there is a degree of government say in how much local authorities receive to carry out their duties, the decision-making over spending on the social work workforce is delegated to authorities. As a result, the government didn't announce social workers as part of the 900,000 because it can't - the sectors where it did announce raises are all areas that have their budgets set and paid for directly by the government. In addition, as our membership shows, a large number of social workers do not work for local authorities.

SWU with BASW continue to campaign and the main issues are wider than just a pay increase.

See our latest campaign in the newsletter: six-point-urgent-action-plan and the developing working conditions campaign.

<https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/social-worker-wellbeing-and-working-conditions>

**John McGowan**  
**General Secretary**

[j.mcgowan@swu-union.org.uk](mailto:j.mcgowan@swu-union.org.uk)

# President's Message



I cannot emphasise too much the great respect for those social workers who have been working on the frontline in such difficult circumstances. This conveniently leads me to recent developments in the Working Conditions campaign in which I am involved. We have been working with an organisation called Campaign Collective. A survey took place about social work during the pandemic. The results were concerning. A six point action plan devised by SWU was sent to a number of sympathetic MPs and members of the House of Lords.

My role as President has changed dramatically as a result of Covid-19. No

longer can I represent SWU in person at meetings and conferences. No longer can I stand at the podium and speak at conferences. Networking has become a thing of the past. No more face to face meetings. All essential meetings are either by teleconference or online video conferencing. It is indeed a brave new world.

Returning for a moment to the Working Conditions Campaign, and in particular our recent Covid-19 survey, I must pay credit to John McGowan who took part in an amazing 11 radio interviews. Carys Phillips, a member of the SWU Executive was on Talk Radio and Lien Watts was interviewed on Sky TV News live.

Please stay as safe as possible and take care.

**James Birchall**  
**President SWU**

## SWU in the Media

It has been a busy summer for SWU with Lien Watts (pictured below) appearing on SKY TV.

Executive Member, Carys Phillips had a great interview on Talk Radio

SWU General Secretary, John McGowan completed 11 radio interviews including BBC Scotland, BBC Newcastle and BBC Suffolk and a number of local radio stations.

Some of the interviews are now available on the 'NEW' SWU YouTube channel and hopefully more will be uploaded soon.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLUZPgX0Zzy-NpmFeBDWXLQ>



# Social Work's Six-Point Urgent Action Plan



The UK's social work system faces collapse as a third of social workers look to leave the profession, according to data collated by the Social Workers Union (SWU). [1]

A survey of SWU members found that all areas of the UK face an avalanche of referrals as lockdown eases. However, it also found that government and employers have neglected social workers' concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic and failed to safeguard their physical and mental health. [2]

## **Key findings from the report reinforce the issues identified in an increasing number of calls to the SWU's helplines:**

- 1** The risk of hidden tragedies with many (49%) social workers frightened that the most vulnerable people have been unable to be reached through digital interventions.
- 2** Almost a tenth of social workers felt that agency staff were used as a "human shield" to protect permanent staff from going into unsafe situations.
- 3** Unscrupulous managers threatened staff who do not comply with unsafe instructions with the sack, over 11% of social workers have been threatened explicitly or through veiled threats with disciplinary action for complaining about unsafe situations.
- 4** 54% felt that PPE was inadequate with a third of social workers having to provide their own face masks. Risk assessments were also rated as ineffective by 51% of social workers and the Social Workers Union took the unprecedented step of recommending frontline staff should perform their own risk assessments to make sure they are safe.
- 5** Two-thirds of social workers report deteriorating mental health as the impact of dealing with the sick and elderly takes its toll. Many have witnessed significant death rates among their clients and are receiving inadequate support in dealing with grief.
- 6** The expected deluge of demand of referrals to social services and required assessments as lockdown continues to ease (exacerbated by the potential pitfalls of staffing levels caused by the build-up of annual leave and TOIL among two-thirds of social workers and continued shielding of one in ten experienced social workers).

**Government and social work employers must take immediate short-term steps set out in this Six-Point Action Plan.**

**This includes increased mental health support, guaranteed PPE, a social work recruitment drive and a pledge not to re-introduce austerity measures.**

This should be coupled with a long-term approach to introduce measures set out in a "working conditions toolkit", developed by the Union, Bath Spa University and the British Association of Social Workers. [3]

## Action One

### **Adequate PPE and risk assessments are a basic minimum requirement of social workers reporting to work.**

Following reports of inadequate PPE and risk assessments, with social workers having to provide their own face masks and the Social Workers Union taking the unprecedented step of recommending front line staff should perform their own risk assessments, urgent action is required.

The Government must make certain that social workers are supplied with adequate PPE and employers need to ensure they are made available to all frontline social workers, both for work and for their commute on public transport.

Employers, through their managers, must be made responsible for carrying out effective risk assessments for all frontline social workers, in particular those carrying out home visits and face to face meetings.

## Action Two

### **Mental health support must be urgently ramped up.**

There has been inadequate support for social workers dealing with grief. Many are working with sick and elderly people and have witnessed significant death rates among their clients.

In addition, a lack of interaction with colleagues and an inability to share and discuss experiences have all had an impact on social workers' mental wellbeing.

Specialist mental health social work has become more prominent in the service, and employers now need to ensure that more social workers are able to develop and acquire basic mental health skills, in supporting themselves and to some extent those around them, including colleagues and clients.

The Government must make certain that all social work employers provide adequate counselling and support for social workers experiencing the heightened stresses caused by this pandemic.

Managers should have the training and aptitude to recognise the effects of stress on front line social workers and dealing with it appropriately, as part of their responsibility.

## Action Three

### **Employers must anticipate and plan for a surge in workload.**

The expected surge in demand of referrals to social services and required assessments as lockdown continues to ease requires foresight.

This will be exacerbated by the potential shortfall in staffing levels due to build-up of annual leave, continued shielding of experienced social workers and regrettably some leaving the sector due to their COVID-19 experience.

Employers now need to fortify their workforce and a nationwide recruitment campaign must be implemented urgently.

There needs to be a focus on recruiting more qualified permanent members of staff to ensure more people come into the sector.

Agency staff should also be considered, but with full recognition of their employment rights (see Action Four).

New social workers will require additional positive mental health support including meaningful supervision.

## Action Four

### **Parity for agency staff must be implemented immediately.**

The evidence shows that agency staff have been used as a “human shield” to protect permanent staff from going into unsafe situations, with unscrupulous managers threatening staff who do not comply with the sack. This has decimated morale, and employers need to do better.

This is an issue which the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) community have felt particularly strongly as they are almost three times more likely to be agency staff than permanent employees. [4]

There is an urgent need for parity in how agency staff are treated.

For too long they have been treated like second class employees and that needs to change.

Employers must understand that to improve morale across their team, every member of staff, agency and permanent, needs to feel valued.

There is also a need for greater dialogue between agencies providing staff and the employer to ensure consistency in the advice given to agency staff and those employed directly by local authorities.

We would also strongly encourage agency staff to become unionised through the Social Workers Union and be active within their union.

## Action Five

### **Taking a holistic view of policy and a permanent end to austerity measures.**

The government needs to take a holistic look at this issue, and realise that on a broader level, the deluge of referrals predicted is as a result of the poverty and inequality experienced by service-users.

Many have been impacted by the austerity measures of the last recession, have now had no access to support in lockdown, and will have little additional support post-pandemic - without sufficient government funding. Women's Aid refuges, mental health support, youth services need to have funding re-instated to pre-austerity levels.

Action to support social workers must be coupled with urgent implementation of policies to end child poverty, fuel poverty and support the most vulnerable through the benefits and welfare system.

There must be urgent and major investment within and beyond local authorities, if social work is to play its fullest, necessary leading part in the recovery in communities across the country.

Social work has always been the 'poor relation' in public services, and this needs to change.

When public health strategy and national governmental decisions are scrutinised, the role of social workers in recovery and future emergency and public health planning needs to be recognised.

There can be no effective public health strategy without social health, and social workers must be seen as critical to the health of the nation.

We cannot ignore the huge funding gap that exists in social work. Moreover, moves to invest in a centralised NHS cannot come at the expense of local social care yet again.

There needs to be a collective realisation across all layers of government of the value of social work, and any bias addressed.

## Action Six

### **Strike a balance between on and offline support.**

There is real risk of hidden tragedies among service-users, with many social workers worried that their most vulnerable clients have not been reached through digital interventions.

Social workers are conflicted by their want to connect with and support their most vulnerable clients, amid the restrictions to physical visits.

Employers must protect frontline, face-to-face contact, but at the same time innovation should be encouraged.

Guidance for engaging with service users through social media, telephone, writing letters, notes through letterbox should be developed.

Outreach should take place to find locations where physically distanced support can be delivered and those most in need identified. This should include foodbanks, befriending services, etc. Partnerships to ensure vulnerable people have access to IT should be encouraged (such as working with charities and social enterprises like SocialBox.Biz).

Employers should encourage use of peer support and team meetings to exchange ideas and ways of working - positives & negatives. Acknowledging that some clients will not cooperate and will not want to be contacted.

[1] 363 social workers completed the survey issued by the Social Workers Union to its members between 21-28 June 2020.

[2] 67% of respondents to the survey say they expect a massive increase in referrals to social services as lockdown continues to ease with an additional 27% expecting a slight increase.

[3] For more information, visit <https://www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/campaigns/professional-working-conditions>

[4] Further analysis of the BAME data will be released at a later date.

# How to Survive in Social Work

SWU Ambassador Dr Neil Thompson talks about his new book written with SWU General Secretary John McGowan

Last year I was honoured to receive an Ambassador Award from the Social Workers Union. I have been a strong supporter of trade unionism throughout my life, starting with the influence of my uncle who taught me what social justice was all about. And, of course, I am particularly keen to support SWU because, as the only trade union specialising in social work issues, it has a key role to play for our profession.

Following the receipt of the Award, SWU General Secretary John McGowan and I looked closely at how we could work together for mutual benefit. When John became aware of my long-standing interest in leadership and workplace well-being, we realised that one thing we very much had in common was a commitment to making the workplace a fair and humane place where people could thrive and not just struggle to survive. From these discussions came a decision to co-write a book on surviving in social work.

That's how *How to Survive in Social Work* came to be born. In writing the book we took the opportunity to highlight how the world of work has been transformed over the years and generally not in a positive way. We also wanted to highlight how, in social work, we face not only these general deteriorations in the quality of working life, but also problems that are specific to social work for various reasons.

Social work is, by its very nature, a demanding and challenging career choice, but that is not necessarily a problem, as those demands are accompanied by major rewards and the opportunity to play an important role in making our society a more humane one and making a positive contribution to social justice. No, the problem is not in social work itself; it is in how social work is located in today's broader sociopolitical context of neoliberalism and the immense pressures on public services in general and social work in particular that arise from this.

So, what we wanted to achieve in the book was fourfold. First, we wanted to acknowledge how incredibly difficult and challenging social work is in today's climate. Yes, as social workers, we tend to be people who enjoy a challenge, people who are fairly robust in dealing with demanding situations. We're made of stern stuff. But, there is a limit to what anyone can handle. Today's additional pressures take us to, and sometimes beyond, that limit fairly regularly. Because of this, it is not surprising that stress is a topic that gets mentioned very frequently. No one need to feel ashamed of struggling to cope in the pressure cooker that is modern social work.

Second, we wanted to emphasise that, because of these potentially very harmful circumstances, it is essential that we pull together and support one another. 'Solidarity' is a word that crops up a lot in the book. There are ways and means that each of us can learn to manage high levels of pressure, but this is much more effective (and satisfying), if it is done together. As esteemed social work author Audrey Mullender once said to me: 'Hang together or be hanged alone'.

Third, we wanted to draw attention to organisational issues and the challenges faced by everyone, especially managers and leaders who will often be squeezed by professional pressures from below and political edicts from above. While examples of poor management practice are not unheard of, it is naïve, inaccurate and unfair to just assume that the work pressures we face are simply a reflection of bad management. The reality is far more complex.

This brings me to the fourth point, namely the need to reaffirm our professionalism to remind ourselves that what we do in social work is vitally important work, even though the tabloid media and some elements of the powers that be consistently fail to appreciate that. As professionals, we should be working together - practitioners, managers and others

alike - rather than falling into 'us-them' ways of thinking. Again, it is about pulling together and supporting one another.

This is not a simplistic plea for 'positive thinking', but we do need to be very aware of how incredibly destructive negativity, defeatism and cynicism can be. We can strengthen one another by supporting each other in collective endeavour or we can disempower ourselves by giving way to cynicism and start on a path that ultimately leads to burnout.

In a nutshell, then, what we say in the book is that, while life in social work is clearly extremely difficult these days for various reasons, we can survive if we take on board important lessons about the dangers involved in high-pressure workplaces and the possible ways of steering clear of the harm that can be done. It's not easy, but it is possible - and, of course, it is necessary if social work is to fulfil its potential while enabling us to stay safe and well.

But, that's not the whole story. Making sure we survive is step one, but we also need to consider aiming for thriving - not just getting by, but actually flourishing as far as possible.

When I was a social work tutor some years ago, it was common for students to ask me what they needed to do to pass the next essay. I always answered in the same way by saying that this was the wrong question. 'What you should be asking me', I would say 'is: How can I get the best mark possible for the next essay?'. If we are intending to settle for a pass, then we actually make it more likely that we will fail. If, however, we aim for getting the best results possible in the circumstances, it makes it far less likely that we will fail - and that applies just as much to social work practice as it does to essay writing. Of course, we won't always get the best results, but aiming for optimal - rather than just satisfactory - outcomes puts us in a much stronger situation in terms of both our likelihood of being successful to some extent at least and our job satisfaction.

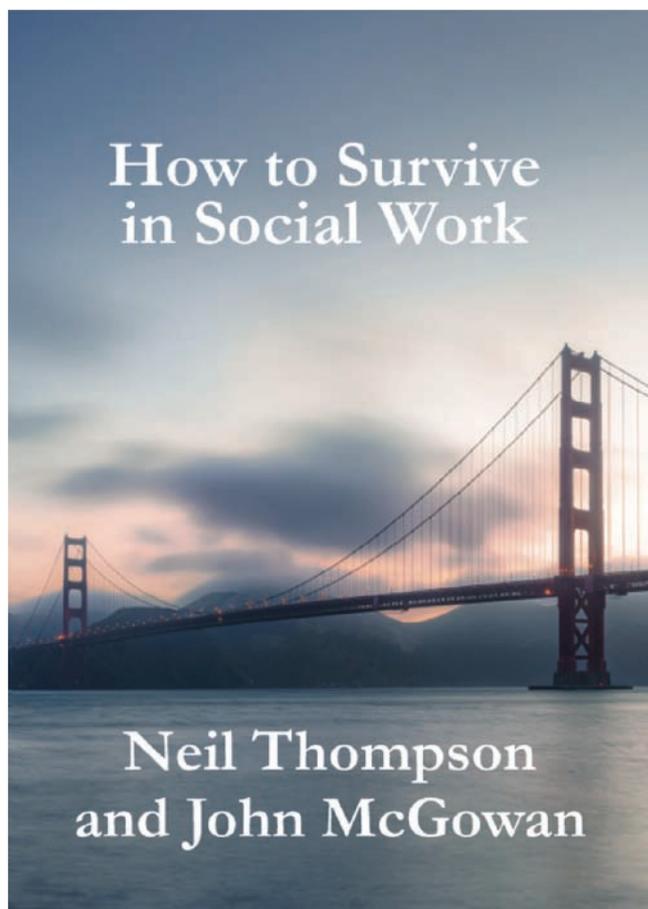
That's what aiming for thriving is all about - not settling for the bare minimum of surviving, but actually having a stab at thriving. This involves flourishing despite the immense pressures we face - better to aim for the optimal and do well even if we don't quite get there than to aim for the minimum and mediocrity and succeed in getting there.

Neil, John and the 'hands' of book illustrator Harry Venning



The book does not provide magic answers, but what it does offer is plenty of food for thought, some important insights into the possible ways of rising to our challenges and, perhaps most importantly of all, a strong reaffirmation of the importance of social work and our role as skilled professionals within it.

The challenges we face in these difficult days are of major proportions, like huge mountains in front of us. But surely problem solving, rising to challenges, empowering ourselves and one another, all in a spirit of partnership is what social work is all about. If anyone can make a success of these immense difficulties, then surely it is us - especially if we work together in solidarity and are buoyed by a reaffirmation of our professionalism as part of our humanitarian striving for a better and fairer society. We are fully aware of just how immensely challenging social work is in this day and age, but we are also fully aware of how much we have to offer - individually and collectively - when we pull together.



**Dr Neil Thompson** is an independent writer, educator and adviser. His website and Learning Zone are at [www.NeilThompson.info](http://www.NeilThompson.info). **John McGowan** is the General Secretary of the Social Workers Union and also works with the Open University in Scotland. Their book, *How to Survive in Social Work*, is published by Avenue Media Solutions with a foreword from BASW CEO Dr Ruth Allen and afterword by David Jones. The book is illustrated by Harry Venning.

It is available at £15.99 directly from the publisher <https://bit.ly/3hyyyWk> or via Amazon Books.

<https://www.avenuemediasolutions.com/product/how-to-survive-in-social-work/>

## Social Media

If you have not done so then please follow us on Facebook and Twitter - we are planning to post and tweet regular updates about the work and developments of the Social Workers Union.

SWU Updates: <http://swu-updates.org.uk/>

### Monthly ebulletins

Monthly ebulletins are emailed to all SWU members. If you are not receiving this then please check what email address we have.

The ebulletins are also published on the web site.

### SWU can be found on the following:

Twitter: SWU\_UK

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/socialworkersunionuk/](http://www.facebook.com/socialworkersunionuk/)

Internet: [www.swu-union.org.uk](http://www.swu-union.org.uk)

## **The 2020 Annual General Meeting of the Social Workers Union will take place virtually from 2 - 3.30pm for members only with voting facilities available once registered.**

Please see SWU Website [www.swu-union.org.uk](http://www.swu-union.org.uk) for proposed AGM rule changes and AGM report details which will be available to view from Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August. All members should have been emailed with information and access details for the AGM or you can register here:

<https://www.basw.co.uk/events/swu-annual-general-meeting-2020>

### **25<sup>th</sup> September 2020 Agenda:**

Attendance at this event is FREE and for SWU Members only. Membership numbers must be stated and will be checked.

- To read the notice convening the meeting
- To receive apologies for absence
- To welcome representatives of kindred organisations and other guests.
- Minutes - to confirm the minutes of the Eighth Annual General Meeting held in Manchester on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019
- To receive report from the General Secretary
- Annual Report and Accounts
- To receive the report of the Auditors and Statement of Accounts for the Social Workers Unions and to adopt the Balance Sheet and the Accounts for the period 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019
- To receive and adopt the Annual Report for the period 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019
- Auditors To appoint Auditors (Finance and Legal) for the year 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021
- Motions To consider the motions which are set out in this agenda and any amendments to Ordinary Motions distributed at the meeting
- To consider the SWU Rule Changes which are set out in the AGM paperwork; with the proposed amendments available to members more than 21 days before this meeting. No rule may be added, amended or deleted other than by resolution of a two thirds majority of those present and voting at the General Meeting.
- Any other Business (including emergency motions)
- Closing speech - SWU President

## Ordinary Motion 1: Member Motion

**Proposer: Peter Unwin**

**Secunder: Naomi Jackson**

Government policy advocates involving people with lived experience in the design and delivery of health and social care. The Austerity Action Group supports such involvement in policy formation but has noted that many service user and carer organisations have folded under austerity and that it is increasingly difficult to attract people with lived experience to commit to co-production. Key reasons for this are the fear of benefits sanctions and the complexities involved in deducting tax and NI for what is often casual, time-limited involvement. Local benefits advice on how to remunerate such involvement is convoluted and contradictory while universities and agencies all take different approaches. The Austerity Action Group proposes in this Motion that it will use its influence as part of SWU, and network across the UK to consult with key stakeholders towards defining a clear policy to put to government regarding remuneration for involvement of service users and carers.

## Ordinary Motion 2

**Proposer: Carys Phillips**

**Secunder: Gerry Madden**

Social work consists of between 78 and 80 percent female workforce and for this reason is described as a 'female-dominated profession'. McPhail has argued that "social work is more correctly described as a female majority, male-dominated profession" (*McPhail, 2004b: 325*). SWU will work to support women are heard and represented through all of its work and endeavours.

*Ref: McPhail BA. (2004b) Setting the record straight: Social work is not a female-dominated profession. Social Work 49(2): 323–326. [PubMed] [Google Scholar]*

## Ordinary Motion 3

**Proposer: Angi Naylor**

**Secunder: Carys Phillips**

The SWU Exec would like to ask the AGM to endorse our thanks to the many social workers who have continued to provide an essential service in very difficult circumstances during the current Covid19 pandemic.

## Ordinary Motion 4

**Proposer: Angi Naylor**

**Secunder: Gerry Madden**

This AGM recognises the great work being undertaken by our union contact activists in helping to support our members through these difficult times and in particular to note the value of the highly skilled advice & representative service providing professional services to those of our members who are experiencing problems in their workplace.

# Union Contact Scheme

## Surge in Interest

Perhaps unsurprisingly there has been a spike in interest from SWU members wishing to become Union Contacts in their workplace or amongst their university cohort. This is understandable given the isolated ways in which many of us are currently working and the need to connect with likeminded people. What better way to do this than getting involved in your trade union - a collective voice for workers' rights who are on your side.

## Future Inductions

At the time of writing we are still awaiting confirmation as per government guidelines as to when we can next hold a Union Contact induction day in Manchester. We feel this is by far the best way to interact and engage, which is necessary for the training, and we agree that this isn't something that can be successfully achieved via Zoom or Skype meetings. Therefore we've agreed to wait until we can undertake proper face to face gatherings again. We realise this is frustrating for those keen to be involved, but we will ensure all are invited to future inductions as soon as we are able to do so.

## What you can do in the meantime?

The important and invaluable part of the Union Contact role is to encourage colleagues to join SWU - the larger we get, the stronger we become.

If any current Union Contacts, or those awaiting induction, require additional information leaflets to share electronically with colleagues, please let me know.

You can also make use of our various social media options. All Union Contacts are welcome to join our SWU UC Facebook Group, and this includes those awaiting induction. If you haven't already joined, please drop me an email and I'll add you to the group.

Additionally, you can interact with the general

SWU Facebook and Twitter pages where we always enjoy hearing from you, or contribute to the monthly Newsletter which is an ideal way to get your voice heard - why not submit a brief article explaining why joining SWU is important to you?

## Clarification re Recognition

New Union Contacts occasionally contact me seeking clarification regarding trade union 'recognition', what it means, and how it might impact on SWU and our members.

In relation to trade union 'recognition', many of the larger multi-profession unions, such as Unison and Unite, often have agreements with employers, such as local authorities or NHS, to negotiate together around general employment issues, for example pay grades, and this is called "collective bargaining". However growing numbers of staff are choosing to join unions specific to their own profession, and these, by definition, are smaller than the huge general unions, and therefore do not yet have collective bargaining agreements.

This is what employers are referring to when they say they "do not recognise" smaller unions such as SWU, however this does not mean that you cannot be represented by your union. Any employee is entitled to join a trade union of their choice, and an employer cannot object to this. Employers cannot prevent a union representative from your union assisting and supporting you with any workplace issue or conflict requiring representation. Your employer cannot refuse to engage with your union representative on any issue of concern specific to your own employment and can only do so for the purpose of general negotiations under the "collective bargaining" agreement as explained above.

Basically, you can be a member of any union (and more than one if you wish, although this might prove to be quite expensive!) but we believe that the best union for social workers is one with a specialist knowledge and understanding of social work - The Social Workers Union.

## Phase 2 Union Contacts

Further developments to the Union Contact programme have enabled several SWU members to progress to become Phase 2 Union Contacts, where they are provided additional GFTU & BASW training to assist with representational work supporting our full-time Advice & Representation Team in local authority workplaces. This exciting element of the scheme is in its infancy, and something that we will be focussing on further in conjunction with BASW and the Advice & Representation Team, so watch this space.

## AAG and Campaigns

Union Contacts have made links with local and national activists via SWU's Austerity Action Group which brings social workers and those with lived experiences together to campaign

within a political arena, and many SWU members and Union Contacts have contributed to our current working conditions campaign highlighting the numerous difficulties faced by social workers attempting to manage a complex caseload, during the pandemic and beyond.

If you'd like to become a Union Contact in your workplace (or university if you're a student social worker) or require further information about any of the above, please get in touch.

*In solidarity,*

**Carol Reid**  
**National Organiser**  
**& Union Contact**  
**Scheme Manager**  
**carol.reid@swu-**  
**union.org.uk**



## The GFTU Young Members' Weekend

Held every year, Young Members' Development Weekend 2020 promotes trade unions to young people and shows how unions are relevant to their lives at work and beyond. It is an opportunity for General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) affiliated unions to campaign on the most important issues for young workers, give a platform to their organising activities and demonstrate the value that young members bring to the trade union movement.



John McGowan, SWU General Secretary highlights that *'the GFTU Young Members' Weekend has established itself as one of the most exciting, high impact Labour Movement events to inspire younger workers to understand more about their unions, the labour movement and the challenges we face politically and in the workplace. It is a high octane event where SWU members will meet other young activists and learn together in an engaging way, with great support and a 'can do' approach so that you can really make a difference in workplaces in the future.'*

The event is fully funded by the GFTU who will cover receipted transport and all learning materials, meals, and overnight accommodation. The GFTU Young Members' Weekend - Fully Funded and is free to SWU members and SWU Social Work Students members aged 30 years of under are eligible to apply for a place.



The dates are Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> - Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2020 at the fantastic Quorn Grange Hotel in Leicestershire. To apply for a place please contact [j.mcgowan@swu-union.org.uk](mailto:j.mcgowan@swu-union.org.uk) The deadline for applications is strictly October 6<sup>th</sup> at 12 noon.

# Practice Wisdom: A Day In The Life Of An Island Social Worker During A Global Pandemic

by Laura Murray



Having graduated university almost two years ago and so early into my social worker career, I was humbled to have been asked to document a personal narrative of working rurally during the current COVID-19 pandemic. As I am writing, you may expect a glorious May spring day, however through the low lying cloud, I can hear the 70mph gusts blowing across the island I call home, reminding me of the remote and isolated landscape in which I live and work. Living in the Outer Hebrides during a global pandemic has brought with it a variety of challenges, both professional and personally but, it has reiterated the importance of community spirit, resilience and has enhanced my faith in humanity.

For this I also wanted to reflect upon my university experience as it was not so long ago I was a student. Although, it feels like many moons ago following nearly two years of practice - this is not a negative statement and time flies when you are having fun. You will also read a mix of professional and personal challenges and highlights which for me personally, have seemed to overlap during the current circumstances which brings its own set of challenges.



## Challenges

Given the intense challenges this week it almost seems like fate that I have left it to last minute to write the first draft of this reflective piece. There have been a number of challenges during 'lockdown' but I will keep this minimum given my "half cup full" mindset. In saying this, I am not discounting the hard feelings and emotions we feel during day to day life and relating to practice challenges - whether we are conducting our roles fully and the pressures of what is expected from us in terms of decision making and if we have made the correct decision or not.

Add this to living on your own in a sparsely populated, isolated island then it becomes extremely difficult to remain in a positive, efficient frame of mind. Especially, when all the work you have done to ensure you have healthy working boundaries has been left in the office eight weeks or so ago, and you are emotionally exhausted feeling like you have to meet everyone's needs. Having said this, I am sure some, if not all of us working as a social worker or in education on the mainland will feel the same, there are just more houses and people around about but this does not mean you do not feel isolated.

We spend most of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not, aiming to please others and whilst this natural human instinct plays on repeat in our minds, nature and character, we forget to please ourselves. Given we have chosen employment that aims to help and support individuals who are experiencing social injustice and

inequality, and if you throw trauma and adversity in, there is a need for you to feel like you need to 'help' and 'please' because when you help somebody it generally feels good but doing it all the time can be exhausting. The emotions that come from being able to please are so very strong and rewarding, however this is not sustainable and you need to 'prioritise the pleasing'. To be able to gain something that is truly rewarding from social interaction and supporting others you first need to care for yourself so that 'help' is appropriate, empowering and meaningful.

Helping service users manage their anxiety surrounding Covid-19 is a very real form of people pleasing with the potential to be disempowering. If we continue to 'over support' and 'please' then we disempower individuals to take control, learn coping skills and manage their own anxiety - we subsequently 'rescue' them. It is well known that people who do not have healthy coping skills are more likely to be effected by long term mental health repercussions and stresses. Normalising this anxiety and relating to individuals seems to have proven positive during the current pandemic. After all we are all in this together.

The use of reflective listening skills helps; acknowledging and reflecting a service user's worries and anxieties back to them reinforces that we hear what they are saying, and, we really do. I certainly have anxiety regarding COVID-19, when I will see my family again, having to do the dreaded weekly shop, will the virus affect the people I am close to. That is where the empathy comes in - the trait that serves me the best in forming relationships with the families I work with, through the anxiety, through the conflict and hard conversations. Yes we have professional roles to fulfil however let's bring it right back to the core values of social work and humanity; balance your professional role with letting clients see a glimpse of the real you, the authentic you and what you were put on this earth to do; to aid people to enable themselves. We are human after all. Seeing individuals being able to empower themselves and others from their experiences, with you effectively 'on the sideline', is a beautiful thing. We are all capable of coming through difficult times stronger; some of us just need to be guided on how to do that. We must remember not to dampen that experience for families and provide appropriate support to help them find that that inner strength.

There have been many more challenges, including conducting assessments within a variety of contexts, from child protection, parenting capacity, additional support needs and vulnerabilities and fulfilling my statutory duties. To do this all within the environment of my own home, unless necessary to conduct home visits, incorporating PPE and social distancing, or garden visits, brings its own challenges in terms of assessment. Plus we do not tend to get heatwave sunshine in the Hebrides. Are we able to actually fulfil the expectations of the assessment process fully and incorporate its main principles?

Reminding myself of the process of assessment, Milner, Myers & O'Byrne (2015) provide a summary based on the work of Coulshed and Orme (2012) who describe it as an ongoing process, in which the service user participates, the purpose of which is to understand people in relation to their environment; it is the basis for planning what needs to be done to maintain, improve and bring about change. It is already a complex process but having to do this from home only adds to the complexity. If I am honest and without sounding unprofessional, reflecting on my assessment skills currently I am not the most effective practitioner from my couch. Service users are also extremely protective of being known to social work services and living in a small community, this is enhanced because everyone knows everyone which makes conducting assessments and ensuring confidentiality during garden visits extremely difficult. This brings up again the worries around decision-making and whether your assessment is appropriately balanced. We again feel disheartened and inadequate, but if we re-frame, we are working with the best tools available to us - which helps us not to be too hard on ourselves as workers.

Amongst the challenges, even the basics like administration paperwork is extremely difficult in terms of sending reports, letters and even printing these documents to send out to families for their consideration. The things that I suppose we

do automatically and may take for granted. With everything being virtual, it has unearthed some of the limitations and challenges of practice however it has prompted me to do a lot of re-framing personally and professionally. I am of the view that this experience and all the above challenges, maybe minus the printing, are all underpinned by an area that has challenged me most - the importance of the ability to critically reflect regularly.

With everything being so fast paced and ever changing during the current COVID-19 pandemic, it has been extremely difficult to reflect upon my practice and experiences. Personally, I am not the most fast paced reflective social worker which I know will come with time and experience. I am a firm believer that being challenged however is a positive experience at any stage of your social work journey. Being challenged encourages us to take the time to reflect and critically reflect and to improve as we progress. Fook (2015, p441) focuses on the work of Donald Schon (for example, 1983 and 1987) in Lishman (2015) and provides clarity in the definitions for critical reflection and in a broader sense, reflection.

*“In Schon’s thinking, reflective practice was a way of reducing the gap, by unearthing the actual theory that is embedded in what professionals do, rather than what they say they do. In this sense reflective practice is essentially a way of improving practice.”*

*“Reflection, on the other hand is broader. It is a way of approaching an understanding of one’s life and actions”*

Yet, although we are working day to day and conducting assessments under difficult and unpredictable circumstances, we will come out of this journey and that is when we will be most reflective. Until then, we just need to make the most of the resources available to us to make attempts to try to continue to be critically reflective practitioners: effective regular supervision in which ever form is key to this process! I know to ask for supervision to make sure I am as effective and reflective as I can be during a global pandemic .... and a coffee or two.

## What Social Work means for me

As I have shared some vague challenges and typically not wanting to end on difficulties during COVID-19, I wanted to highlight the passion I have for social work in an attempt to empower and remind social workers, students and educators that the work they are doing is invaluable and there are many positive things happening during this pandemic. I have not seen a poster yet that details social workers as key workers but I am not disheartened. I do not want free coffees or 10% discounts from shops - I would rather pass that to my families for they are the most amazing key workers who are educating their children at home, holding down jobs having been furloughed and not knowing how long it will last. They are worried about money, nurturing their children whilst dealing with their own anxieties, stresses and trauma. What my eyes see and my heart feels from working with families on a daily basis is enough for me to know that I am a key worker because after all it is a partnership. If my eyes could take photos, they would produce pictures of compassion, kindness, empowerment and resilience through one of the strangest, uncertain and difficult times we all have ever experienced.

## Looking back

During my first social work placement, I detailed in my first reflective log that I wanted to help and support people and that I wanted to be a good role model in empowering the younger generation based on my own experiences. My values remain the same, if not richer and stronger. For me it is the people who make social work and the values and life experiences they have, whether client or professional. I love the work we do and having a ‘cup half full’ approach means I am able to savour the positive parts of

the job. You will see me reflect upon my student and placement experiences a lot throughout this narrative as on reflection they have had more of an influence than I first thought at the time. My own Practice Teacher encouraged and reminded me to never lose the ability to see the small rewarding aspects of practice. These are the key components in the art of relationship building and reminding ourselves of the good throughout the hard times. Remembering what may look small may be huge for the person you are working with, whether this be simply completing something you both agreed for them to do for the next time you see them or physically getting out of bed and getting dressed in the morning for you visiting. It is these small things that we need to praise, support and empower within our clients and ourselves, and being able to recognise them wholeheartedly is what will get us through the crisis we are currently experiencing.

## Relationships

Collectively, whether we are individuals who use services, social workers, practice teachers, educators or in a role focused on learning and development - we are all in this together, in partnership with the people we work with and each other. Although, more focused on worker-client relationship, it is relevant to the relationship between manager-social worker, student-practice teacher/educator and even social worker-social worker. Thompson (2018, p69) affectionately reiterates that “social work is what we do with people, not to them”.

This also extends to colleagues within the multi-agency teams we work in and in stressing the importance of keeping each other’s spirits up, especially during the current circumstances.

Empowering and being kind to ourself and others are fundamental principles of my social work narrative, character and day to day practice. Relationships for me are extremely important as living alone especially during this crisis can be isolating and difficult. I use texts, video chats/facetime, GIFS (personal favourite) to connect. I also try to make it through this uncertainty happy and healthy and sitting with those difficult emotions. If we need to cry then we should cry and be kind to ourselves.

From a former student’s point of view, Practice Educators please continue to empower future students, your advice and guidance prepares us for practice and is invaluable. The building blocks you provide us with in the short time impacts us into our career and for me, this will stay with me for the duration of mine. Remind yourself of what an amazing job you do and continue good self-care routines. Remember, as students we learn good social work habits from you.

For students, reflect on the importance of that relationship with your Practice Educator and tutor as you will continue to draw on this to support, not only your practice, but yourself as you step into your professional journey. Be committed to your learning experience, especially during these uncertain times as they will not always be uncertain. Think of this as a key time for personal and professional development. It is tough, it is uncertain, you may not feel worthy and you may feel inadequate. You may feel vulnerable, out of your depth and that you are ‘juggling too many plates at once’, but you are strong, motivated, passionate and WILL come out the end of this pandemic a more well-rounded person, ready to embrace and take on the social work world. Remember what brought you to into social work in its purest sense. Whatever role we have during this crisis ... we are all in it together!

*“Daring greatly means the courage to be vulnerable. It means to show up and be seen.  
To ask for what you need, to talk about how you are feeling.  
To have the hard conversations.”*

**Brene Brown**

*“It’s not about how much you do, but how much love you put  
into what you do that counts.”*

**Mother Teresa**

## Humour

Humour also plays a huge part in my day to day life and appropriately in practice. I really enjoy seeing people smile and laugh. I happen to think I can be hilarious sometimes - maybe my colleagues and clients would not second that. Please try to find the joy during this crisis, even if it is hard to reach or in little abundance. Enjoy an appropriate joke or two with your clients. It does not only work well when used appropriately to resolve conflict but to ease the tensions and anxieties, especially as they are so prevalent during COVID-19. "Social work isn't a barrel of laughs, but laughter can help us through the most difficult of times. After all, humour has the potential for establishing rapport with clients, easing tensions with colleagues and for being a therapeutic outlet for oneself." (Drinkwater, 2011)

When it comes down to it, my humour has served me well during the current pandemic and has gotten me through tough times. The phrase "if you don't laugh, you'll greet" comes to mind.

## Highlights

In terms of highlights; if I picture 'lockdown' like a Facebook memory then there have been plenty of good times. What I have found is that we are becoming part of the community more. The negative stigma for social workers seems to have lifted slightly, with more and more clients being happy to see me in their gardens (it must be the humour!). Isolation is playing a huge part in this and as the societal inequalities emerge and become clearer, families are relying on us more and more to support them in their basic of needs; food parcels, assisting with benefit applications, reassuring their anxieties and reminding them that they are capable of teaching their children at home. I am in awe of my clients, the community spirit and the current pandemic has reminded us of human qualities that seemed to have been lost whilst living life in the fast-lane. People are embracing their kindness, compassion, willingness to help with the view of expecting nothing in return, all of which are central to making it out of this pandemic in one piece. It is the hope that we come out of 'lockdown' with simple lives filled with all the positives that have unearthed during this; the love for our families, positive physical and mental health and strength in our willingness to adapt and change the world we live in.

*"You must be the change you want to see in the world"*

**Mahatma Gandhi**

## Reading List

**Drinkwater, M.** (2011). *Why Humour Is So Important In The Social Work Workplace*.

Available: <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2011/01/06/why-humour-is-so-important-in-the-social-workworkplace/>. Last accessed 22nd May 2020.

**Fook, J.** (2015). Reflective Practice and Critical Reflection. In: **Lishman, J** *Handbook for Practice Learning in Social Work and Social Care*. 3rd ed. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. p440-454.

**Milner, J., Myers, S. & O'Byrne, P.** (2015). *Assessment in Social Work*. 4th ed. London: Red Globe Press. p1-16.

**Thompson, N** (2018). *The Social Worker's Practice Manual*. United Kingdom: Avenue Media Solutions. p69-76.

# Practice Wisdom: A Day In The Life

by Robyn Moffat-Wall

*Robyn is a social worker having graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University in 2018. Robyn went straight into working as a Refugee Integration Adviser at the Scottish Refugee Council in Glasgow and “hasn’t stopped learning since”.*

*Robyn shares her personal and professional experiences of lockdown including the value of digital learning, particularly to support #BlackLivesMatter (with some recommended links) and how their service has adapted to meet the needs of service users.*



My role focusses mainly on supporting individuals and families who have recently been granted Leave to Remain by the Home Office and who need some help managing this transition into their new beginning in Scotland. It is usually a period of lots of change for individuals and families, and almost all of my clients experience homelessness during this period. We provide support, advice and advocacy during this period of transition as well as support individuals and families to plan for their futures, to think about what they hope to achieve either in their family life, education or career.

Another vital part of my role is also to support refugees and asylum seekers facing destitution due to financial or housing crises. Crisis intervention over the phone has been tricky to adapt to, but it is my opinion that during lockdown our services have adapted well to be delivered over the phone and digitally. Our new Helpline is run by advisers such as myself, and we have a brand new AI live chat feature on the website, which has allowed us to become more responsive to client’s needs during this time of uncertainty.

I have been trying to make good use of my extra free time outside of work now that I am at home almost 24/7. I’ve funnelled some of my excess energy into online courses and webinars that I’ve found in various corners of the internet.

I chose to take on a course in Humanitarian Development with the aim of improving my knowledge of what Humanitarian Aid is and how it is managed in areas of conflict. It’s provided a lot of points to consider in terms of trauma informed practice as well as acting as a reminder of the realities of people’s experiences of living in conflict zones.

Alongside that, in the wake of the recent protests and violence across the US and now more recently in the UK sparking a global focus on campaigning for racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement, I enrolled in a course on the British Empire and the controversies of British Imperialism with the University of Exeter. As my work is predominantly with people from BAME backgrounds, I felt it was my duty to educate myself more about racism in the UK and how deep white supremacy has been ingrained into all aspects of our society. This course is free via a digital learning platform called Future Learn: <https://www.futurelearn.com/>

This felt like a good place to start for me, as I enjoy structured learning, but perhaps reading articles and books, or engaging in webinars on the topic are other less rigid ways of learning we can all engage in to include a focus on anti-racism in our practice and development.

Another webinar which I found really interesting explores global responses to the Covid19 pandemic, with expert speakers from

around the world giving their perspectives on how global health actors should respond.

Webinar | COVID in Conflict: How Should Global Health Actors Respond?

Hosted by Global Health Institute - American University of Beirut

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwKSFd\\_oLqQ&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwKSFd_oLqQ&feature=youtu.be)

In the webinar, Claude Bruderlein (Strategic Advisor to the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross) discusses a “whole of society approach” to containing the pandemic - where each individual in society takes a level of personal responsibility on disease control. This could be by washing hands, adhering to local lockdown or quarantine regulations, wearing masks or circulating public health advice around hard-to-reach communities.

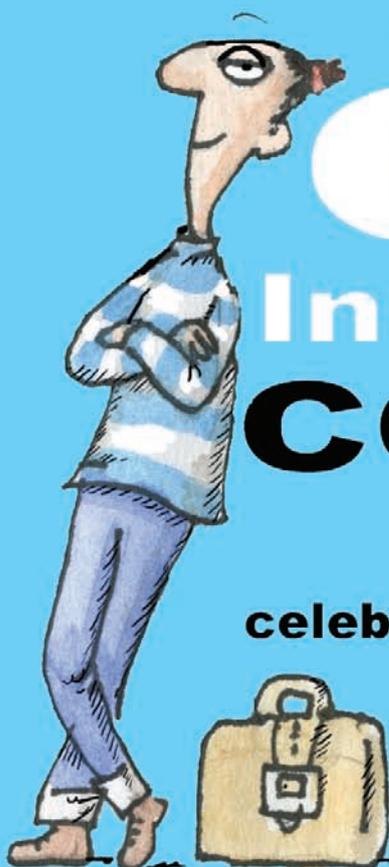
The speakers also discuss how this “whole of society approach” faces a challenge when widespread fatigue sets into communities. Feelings of fatigue has been expressed not only by my colleagues in the third sector, but also by my clients. Many are feeling trapped in their own homes, often without internet access or entertainment that many of us take for granted. Families are struggling to keep their

children engaged in learning, many single people have been living in hotel rooms for months. Tired is the word many of my clients use.

It would be helpful to extend Mr Bruderlein’s “whole of society approach” to our practice by encouraging each other (service users included) to be gentle with one another at this time, and prioritise self-care where possible. This could go a long way in preventing burn out within ourselves, and for clients it could work to prevent the feeling of fatigue from becoming overwhelming.

For those of us working from home, we are now left without the ability to bounce ideas around the office and have challenging discussions with our colleagues as we usually would. This was always something I valued about my workplace, so much learning takes place in the conversations we have with colleagues over a casual cup of coffee in the office - a phone call or Zoom chat isn’t quite the same to me.

For me, engaging with digital learning resources has helped me to not only further my professional development and training needs, but also to encourage myself to consider my practice from other perspectives and to provide points of reflection.



# The **clare** In The Community **COLLECTION** by **Harry Venning**

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## Under Pressure

The recent articles from SWU Advice and Representation have gone down well with emails asking for more. We are therefore delighted that SWU Trade Union Advice and Representation Officer Christina Ramage shares a reflective piece that a SWU member had written and shared with A&R:



I wanted to share with you a reflective piece that a social worker had written, at a time when she felt isolated, professionally criticized, and very vulnerable. We know that through these last months we have had to adapt on a daily basis to the impact Covid-19 has had on the whole of society. However, in social work we continued our frontline work, without any media appreciation of the cost this had to our own lives and the family around us. During my work with this member, she described the events before lockdown as being overwhelming, the caseloads too high, the lack of adequate supervision, her own supervisor presenting as disengaged, and her commitment to the work was taking over her life. She began to question everything she thought she knew about herself as a professional, and the profession itself. However, she remained committed to her role in social work and had a high regard for the organization she worked for. This led to further internal conflict about things not being supportive around her and deteriorating to the point she felt that no matter how hard she worked the line management needed, wanted, expected more.

There was an investigation into her practice that added significant pressure during lockdown, she had to dig deep and keep an objective perspective to be able to reflect on events and what the contributory factors were. We often forget as we move through our work at a high-pressured pace with a view of deadlines, statutory requirements, regulatory demands, and standards that we need to stop sometimes and consider the social work values we work to. If we do this, then surely applying them to ourselves, the working environment, and our expectations of fairness then many such situations can and would be avoided in many instances.

There could not be a better example of someone who is committed to her organization and the work they do but the demands placed upon her become overwhelming and unrealistic. She considers herself professionally competent and went on to demonstrate this throughout subsequent proceedings. But we need to sometimes ask how did we get here, if policies and procedures are followed would we make better decisions as managers? In allocating work, in weighting caseloads and in monitoring social workers through the supervision process, we should be aware of the impact the work has upon individuals and never lose sight of the joint responsibility between the worker and the line management accountability to support and sustain the work we do.

## Lockdown Chronology

Lockdown has been very difficult and the depletion in my resilience has been determined by many factors. I am a single woman living alone with a workload that is disabling. The news is full of the statistics for black people posing a greater risk of dying from Covid19. This knowledge served to intensify my fears around the virus.

I voiced worries around the impact of heavy workloads and competence – not because I felt incapable, but because I was exhausted by work pressures and not enjoying good health; but continuing to work. At the same time, I was exposed to so many challenging situations at once with my carers, service user having cancer, audit causing negative comments about case notes, and the breakdowns of placements for 6 young people. My daughter having coronavirus at the same time my mum had an accident were both emotive and worrying events. Supervision should have been the forum to take how I was feeling, yet there was seemingly no place on the agenda, or time given to discuss emotion in supervisions with my manager. I'm not a senior social worker but have the highest caseload and manage much that requires management intervention. My supervisor failed in her duty of care to me by making supervisions a tick box exercise during which she presented as tired and indifferent and she has only once asked how I was during the past year.

Since lockdown I've been self-alienating; working like a machine and not allowing myself to feel. In ordinary circumstances this would have been fine; however, during lockdown, I've been unable to balance such a maladaptive coping strategy with my usual opportunities for regular social engagement, so to help me look at the issues I decided to keep a chronology of events as they unfolded and impacted on me professionally and personally.

### 6th to 10th March

Leave cancelled March due to heavy

workload. Worked on Saturday 7th March to support a new child moving in.

### 10th March

Last day in the office. Advised to work from home due to roadworks for next two weeks.

Caseload of 24 children and 8 Carers.

Struggling to manage and told manager behind with recordings.

Had a physical meeting with manager and colleague requesting a new SSW.

### 12th March

(Daughter, 22), visiting for a few days to see her niece. She is not feeling great - tired and a little giddy.

### Weekend 13th to 15th March

Monthly weekend with M, (granddaughter), ahead of her 3rd birthday on Monday.

Call from St Vincent. Mum's had an accident - she was making porridge and fainted face first into the pan. Serious burns. She's 82, but fit, able and independent. A shock to realise no matter how young she seems, the years are still there. Doctors can't tell why she fainted.

M is unwell with a chest infection. Crying all the time. Not like her.

Saturday night realized my daughter has coronavirus.

All following week daughter is frighteningly unwell, she's burning one minute yet so cold the next needed to heat her with the hairdryer; vomiting, piercing headache, struggling to walk as bones hurt. Hospital say 99% coronavirus; but won't allow her admittance until 7 days have passed. Manager allowed me 2 days off. By day 11, daughter much better. Managed to get her home the day before lockdown.

## April

Workload heavier than ever. So many risk assessments and policies to urgently change due to coronavirus.

I live by myself and lockdown is very lonely.

Church are doing services on Zoom. Church and speaking to friends/family are my only social outlets.

Diagnosed with Sciatica. Continued to work.

Member of church family and friend's mum passed away from coronavirus.

Five annual reviews to type, doing them OOH's as no time during the day.

Managing allegations for family.

No time to switch off. Exhausted.

## May

Broke wrist on 3rd when I lost balance on my new Kangoo Jumps. Work is so constant, I just wanted to try out something fun. In a lot of pain and not sure I can continue to work; told manager. Working anyway and using the voice recorder for some things.

Friend's hen weekend and Church weekend away now cancelled. Friend's wedding not until next year now too.

Got a mole on my chest checked. I'll monitor.

Stressed. Made error at work and now fear consequences. Sad no recognition of the 2:00am finishes, just what's done wrong.

So very tired. Asked again for 2 weeks to get straight. Manager dismissive.

## 24th May

Manager sent incorrect medical information about my wrist. Told her what was wrong with document. I won't sign until changed.

Breakdown of placement after 10 years. So much work on this. Glad could arrange respite at least.

## 26th May

George Floyd. As a black woman it pains me to see this. Things still do not change.

## June

Manager seems to be panicking about things not done. She keeps calling. Denying conversations have happened. What's that about?

5th suspended. Why call me at 6:30pm? Shocked. Bereft. I can't pay my bills without my degree. Being a social worker is the career I put myself through university as a single parent to achieve. I've been working like a machine towards outcomes that feel impossible. Feel broken.

Mole looking bigger. Video appointment with GP who asked me to go in physically. I have an emergency hospital appointment - directly after my hearing. Terrified, but sadly my suspension isn't allowing time to think about this.

Flat tyre from puncture - just add to the list ...

Main holiday to Caribbean with my closest friends cancelled. Nothing to look forward to this year now.

Suspension ongoing. It feels like a foregone conclusion - but I have representation to support me

It feels almost traitorous to have not gone to the BLM rally at the weekend. An important issue I should have supported; but fear of potentially being caught up in troubles and the risk that this may be used against me by my employer overshadowed.

Hearing held; representation supported me.

The outcome was positive for me, and I have returned to work. Things are very different. My manager has changed, and I've had a significant reduction in my caseload. Work are demonstrating a very supportive approach. The entire process - over a very long 2½ weeks, was beyond scary; but was necessary too in a strange way, so the changes needed could be brought about. This has been a huge learning experience in so many ways.

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