

Information for practice educators and organisations supporting practice learning - Resumption of social work placements 2020

Introduction

Work to develop and collate the information here has been undertaken by the Practice Learning Leads from social work programmes across all the HEIs and has been supported by the SSSC.

When the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions were imposed in March 2020, social work student placements were suspended across Scotland.

There has been extensive collaborative work across universities, Scottish Government, the SSSC and other partners to support the safe return of students to practice learning placements and many students restarted or began their practice learning from summer 2020.

Placements are being planned and are taking place during extraordinary times and this results in some uncertainty for everyone involved in practice learning.

Each section on this page contains information and resources to support agencies and practice educators with practice learning during COVID-19. It is based upon the many helpful ideas and suggestions provided by a wide range of practice educators and placement agencies throughout Scotland.

Information is included in the following sections:

Approaches to working remotely with social work student placements

Learning Environment

Supervision

Student Support on Placement

Assessment

Direct Observations

Health and Safety

Information to support Social Work Students

Guidance for using online platforms

Remote Working & Wellbeing

An **Induction checklist** is provided as a supporting document, **Student** and **Agency risk assessment** forms will also be provided by universities.

Learning Environment

Responses to the SWEP consultation indicated that most agencies expect to still be operating on a flexible office/home working pattern by the time placements resume and so this will also apply to students. It was acknowledged that many students will not have access to appropriate and confidential space within their own homes to facilitate effective home working. Suggestions to address this include:

- Ensuring that students with no privacy at home are provided with as much office-based time as possible.
- Where the week is split between office and home working, ensure that students complete service user contact and agency records and reports within the office-based days, thus safeguarding confidentiality. Home working days could be used for supervision, preparing supervision tasks and activities, reflective logs, reading and research, theoretical analysis etc. Preparatory work for service user assessments could be undertaken at home, with records transferred to agency systems during office-based days.
- Agency requirements regarding home working and ensuring confidentiality when working remotely need to be addressed within induction and included in the learning agreement.
- When planning the induction, consideration could be given to any training that is available online, which would support students needing more flexible working hours.
- Induction needs to include training on agency procedures in respect of online and home working, confidentiality, GDPR requirements and use of PPE.
- Online learning resources may be helpful in supporting students needing a more flexible pattern of working hours, for example to accommodate childcare or other caring responsibilities. Such activities could be completed at times to suit the student's circumstances rather than requiring all work to be undertaken during standard 9-5 working hours. Again, however this needs to be clearly outlined on the learning agreement.
- Agencies have developed creative methods for maintaining contact and connecting with service users. Providing students with opportunities to shadow and observe such approaches can reinforce relationship-based practice.

Supervision

Different approaches to supervision are likely to be needed for placements involving remote working. This may involve a blended approach of individual and group supervision, some of which is likely to take place via online platforms.

- When using both individual and group supervision, it is essential not to prioritise one at the expense of the other. All students must receive weekly supervision.
- Group supervision requires careful preparation and an awareness of its pitfalls to ensure that it provides a stimulating and encouraging experience for all concerned and enables participants to participate and share.
- Group supervision can be used to minimise student isolation within secondary settings or where practice educators are managing a cluster of placements.
- 1-1 and group/peer supervision could use models such as the Three Stage Theory Framework (Collingwood, 2005) or the Practice Pyramid (Gordon and Mackay, 2016) to reflect on areas of practice. Risk analysis and emotional resilience could also form part of individual and group discussion.
- Online supervision sessions can be helpful as they allow for flexibility, save time in travelling and ease pressure at the host agency. Establishing a 'personal' relationship i.e. 'in person' relationship with a student, remains best practice and will hopefully become more feasible as restrictions ease.
- There is existing experience of utilising mixed models of face-to-face and online supervision, for example within more rural settings. In such settings, patterns of face-to-face supervision every 4 weeks with online meetings for the remainder of the time have been found to be effective and could be adapted to the Covid-19 remote working environment.
- A number of placement settings may have difficulty in providing confidential space for supervision where physical distancing can be maintained, and other venues may need to be utilised for face-to-face contact. Meeting outside could be considered, where risks of virus transmission can be minimised and mirrors the 'garden' home visits/assessment which social workers are currently using in practice. Libraries and other public buildings may also have space that can be utilised. The need for confidentiality is crucial in all settings.
- Reflective accounts could usefully consider the impact of Covid-19 both personally and professionally and could be used to inform discussion in supervision.
- Microsoft Teams or other online platforms could be used for recording which can facilitate the use of supervision for evidence. A number of agencies have explicitly stated that permission to record online sessions with service users would not be granted. Issues of consent are crucial and must be confirmed prior to recording any discussions or activities. Clarification of agency protocols regarding recording must be confirmed at the beginning of placement and stated in the Learning Agreement.
- Supervision needs to include a regular focus on the student's mental health, emotional wellbeing and resilience. This is particularly important where students are working from home with more limited opportunities to 'offload' and examine their emotions when dealing with issues of abuse, risk and harm and separate their work activities from their home life.

Student Support on Placement

Given the likelihood that most placements will involve remote working, additional student support will be required irrespective of whether the practice educator is within the agency or off site. Working remotely means that students will not have the same access to daily and ad-hoc support from link workers, practice educators and other team members. It is likely therefore, that a broader range of staff within an agency will need to contribute to ensure that support is available to the student whenever it may be required. Plans for managing ad-hoc and formal support should be considered within the induction and outlined in the learning agreement.

- Link supervisor and/or buddy could be identified to have regular (daily/alternate day) brief online catch-up/debrief with the student. Some agencies suggesting allocation of a team buddy in addition to named link worker will offer additional support/contact arrangements for students. This could also ensure that students have support to manage the potential blurring of professional boundaries with home working.
- Arrangements for online debrief time after contact with service users to enable students to reflect and develop their understanding.
- Clarity around team support – identify team meetings, informal support meetings and any other networks.
- Peer support - online meetings could be established for students located in the same placement agency and/or from the same university.
- Online discussion forum could be established within agencies hosting a number of student placements. This could act as both a learning forum and emotional support system.
- Clarity as to the nature of ongoing online support being provided by the student's tutor/university.
- Supporting students to address their own confidentiality when working from home. For example, ensuring they know how to create a 'backdrop' for their screen when engaging in online meetings, visits etc. so that their personal home environment is not visible.

Assessment

A range of suggestions were offered as to activities that supplement student direct contact with service users, inform supervision discussions and contribute to the practice educator's assessment of the student.

TASK	WORKING EXAMPLE
Reflective log or diary	Could be part of numerous remote working tasks completed by student if involved in a blended type of learning i.e. part week at placement setting/ part of week working at home. Reflections on the student's experience of working in the Covid-19 context.
Supervision discussions	Can be in person, online or on the phone. 1:1, peer and group supervision models could be used and could incorporate students using models such as Three Stage Theory Framework (Collingwood, 2005) or Practice Pyramid (Gordon & Mackay, 2016) to reflect on areas of practice.
Professional discussions	A structured discussion with students on a topic aligned to practice and specific SiSWE & Ethical principles. This could involve other team members and/or other professionals with clarification as to how this is fed back to the practice educator to inform their assessment of the student.
Witness statements	Recorded testimony from relevant others regarding student's practice and performance. Formal direct observations may also be undertaken by colleagues other than the PE and link worker.
Feedback from service users and carers	Online remote contact between Practice Educator and Service User, Team colleagues and or other disciplines on the practice performance of the student
Feedback from colleagues	Written or verbal
Feedback from other professionals	Written or verbal
Critical writing e.g. Critical Incident Analysis or Process Recording	Production of written analytical evidence within an agreed framework or structure
Activities or tasks set by PE	Researching a topic and producing a critical analysis or product for the agency or other learners. Students could work on research projects individually or in small groups.
Group Supervision tasks/activities	Pre-determined and linked activities that enhance and complement the one to one supervision in place for students
Learning from virtual activities	Role-play, simulation exercises or engaging with online learning material and producing work activities associated with this learning could support student learning. However, this should be seen as supplementary rather than a replacement for direct practice. Students could be asked to complete an anonymised family history in which they create a chronology, genogram, comprehensive assessment and safety plan.
Online Presentation	Possible production of PowerPoint style slides in order to give a verbal presentation via platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams etc. This could focus, for example,

	on a piece of practice, exploration of theory/research or a project undertaken on behalf of the team.
Engaging in support and networks from the agency, student groups, university	Student support groups, support from agency, peers and feedback, university supports

Direct Observations

There is a need for greater flexibility with direct observations, both in terms of who is able to undertake them and the type of situation to be observed. SWEP agreed that the named practice educator should carry out a minimum of one direct observation. While best practice remains that the PE would undertake all or the majority of direct observations, specific placement circumstances may make that challenging. Flexibility is needed to respond to the opportunities that occur for students to undertake direct practice with service users and enable those best placed to undertake the direct observation of the student within each situation. However, direct observations need to be effectively planned and written up in accordance with university requirements.

It is acknowledged that some direct observations may occur via online platforms and the following guidance has been suggested for managing that:

- Where possible, consent should always be sought from service users and professionals involved in the activity and the observation agreed in advance with the service user and practice educator.
- Many agencies prohibit the recording of online contact with service users and so clarity is needed in the event that any recording is planned for the purposes of a direct observation.
- Once introduced, the observer could remain muted with their camera turned off in order to remain a more discreet part of the meeting.
- Online group work sessions could present useful opportunities for direct observation of a student's practice. The observer, if not one of the group facilitators, could be introduced and then muted with their camera off during the session.
- Other key workers involved in facilitating learning opportunities could undertake direct observations, subject to appropriate guidance and preparation from the practice educator.
- Service user feedback remains critical and means of achieving this should be considered where the observation takes place without the presence of a PE.
- The direct involvement of service users in all observations remains good practice. This may not always be contact in the same physical environment and may involve video calls or meetings via online platforms.

Health & Safety

Preparing for and staying safe on your social work student placement.

In the context of current climate, it is important that students engage with, learn about and demonstrate their understanding of both their own and the agency's responsibilities within the sphere of health & safety.

Risk Assessment

The University will provide two risk assessment forms: a Student Risk Assessment and an Agency Risk Assessment. The student risk assessment document should be completed before placement. Once a placement has been identified and a Practice Educator allocated, the agency and practice educator should complete the appropriate sections of the agency risk assessment. This should be shared with all of the practice learning team and further discussion should take place if any vulnerability or risk factors have been identified. Appropriate measures to be taken to minimise these identified risks or vulnerabilities should be recorded. Reference to completion of the agency risk assessment and any measures taken should be recorded in the Practice Agreement and signed by the student, tutor, practice educator and link worker (where applicable).

Both risk assessments should be reviewed at the mid-stage of placement as part of the mid-point meeting and any amendments recorded. Should there be changes at any time to the student's circumstances, or within the placement agency, the risk assessment should be updated to record these, and any subsequent amendments made as required and recorded. All members of the learning team are responsible for reporting and recording any changes.

The prevention and control of virus transmission

As citizens we all have a responsibility towards the prevention and control of the virus. Infection prevention and control precautions are of critical importance to reduce the spread of the virus and keep ourselves and the people and families we support safe. There is standard guidance which we should all follow, including social distancing, hand hygiene, cough and sneeze etiquette. Guidance on staying safe can be found [here](#)

In some placement settings, for example providing direct care to people in their homes or in residential settings, there will be additional guidance on controlling the virus and keeping yourself and others safe. Please see the below link to key information on infection control and prevention. Please also follow any agency guidance which is in place.

SSSC [Infection Control](#)

Scottish Government [Residential Childcare](#)

Personal Protection Equipment: National guidance has been published on the use of [PPE in health and social care settings](#).

It is also important to follow any agency guidance or protocols on the use of PPE and on preventing the transmission of the virus and this should be explained to you through induction to your placement setting.

Test, Trace and Protect

It is important to be aware of your responsibilities in controlling the spread of the virus and take action. The Test, Trace and Protect process should be followed by all students and information can be found [here](#). Please make sure that you are aware of this and any future changes that might come into effect.

Travel

Below is the Scottish Governments' current guidance on using public transport;

You can only travel if you aren't showing coronavirus symptoms and neither you nor any of your household are [self-isolating](#).

You can use public transport (buses, trams, subways, trains or aircraft) and private/commercial vehicles (car, taxi, minibus or lorry) to travel to and from work. Stay 2 meters apart whenever possible and avoid busier times of travel to ensure you can follow physical distancing

The Scottish Government has made the use of [facial coverings](#) mandatory when using public transport.

Please make sure that you are aware of this and any future changes that might come into effect.

Home visits guidance

Both the placement agency and you have responsibilities to minimise the risk of virus transmission when undertaking home visits on the behalf of the agency. The below information from Scottish Government, SSSC and BASW provide helpful guidance to help you prepare and undertake home visits.

SSSC [Working safely](#)

Scottish Government [Social worker guidance on safe contact](#)

BASW [Professional practice guidance home visits](#)

BASW [Face to face checklist](#)

Further health and safety considerations

Home working. You might find it useful to review some of the below documents to help prepare and support you with home working if this will form part of your placement.

SSSC [guidance on working from home](#)

Skills for Care [Top Tips for working remotely](#)

Health & Safety Executive [Guidance](#) on working at home

Advise for organisations and their [staff working in non-healthcare settings](#) and includes information on compliance

It is importance that everyone feels safe in their working environment whether that is office-based, home based or a blend of both. If you have any concerns or questions, please raise this with your placement agency/practice teacher/tutor as soon as possible in order for a resolution to be reached.

Guidance for Online Platforms for Social Work Students

In order to ensure that social work students can progress to qualification and be prepared for the changing practice environment, Social Work Education has adapted, and many placements will comprise a mixture of remote working, office based and some home visits.

In order to support students on placement where there is remote working, the following guidance should be considered alongside Health and safety and student remote working guidance.

Digital Capabilities

Ensuring ethical practice whilst working online is always vital for social workers. BASW has developed a [useful summary of their digital capabilities](#) framework.

Practical Guidance

Preferred Online Platform:

Each placement setting may use a different online platform for communicating with each other and with service users and carers. These can range from MS Teams, Zoom, Skype and others. Students need to clarify with agencies the preferred platform and any local guidance that has been developed. Students should only use the platforms that have been agreed with the agency and follow all agreed protocols.

Laptops

At the start of placement there needs to be clarification about digital hardware. Many placement providers will use the Resumption of Placement grant to purchase laptops for use by students but there may be some agencies who have been unable to purchase additional laptops and alternative arrangements have been made.

The priority for all online activity is to secure confidentiality and ensure that all communications comply with GDPR. Agency policies and guidance should be sought to ensure compliance.

Agency Laptops/Phones/Equipment

Any equipment loaned to students whilst on placement need to have a signed declaration outlining the responsibility of both student and agency. There should be clear guidance on the following:

- Secure storage of the equipment- students need to ensure that a safe, secure and preferably locked location is identified within their home for all loaned equipment.
- Use of equipment- students should seek clear guidance around the limits of their use of the equipment and ensure it is ONLY used for placement purposes. The equipment should only be used during placement hours and for use only on placement business.
- Equipment for sole use by students- no other family member should have access to the laptop under any conditions.
- Passwords should be kept securely by the student only and must not be shared with anyone.

- Student's responsibility to return the laptop at the end of the placement in the same condition as at the beginning.

Online meetings

The following meetings may be held online whilst students are on placement:

- supervision with PE and ongoing contact with link worker
- team meetings
- multi-agency meetings
- service user and carer meetings

It is important to prepare for each meeting in a similar way as you would if the meeting was face to face. Here is an [article](#) that makes a few suggestions about how you can create 'thinking space' whilst working from home.

As well as creating the necessary space to think through your online meeting it is also important to consider your physical environment and ensure the following:

- Create a neutral space at home where you will have no interruptions- consider using a note or other method to alert other household members to your meeting.
- Ensure that any photos or other private items are hidden from view.
- Use settings to protect your privacy- many platforms such as MS Teams allow you to choose your background. This is particularly important if working from your bedroom.
- If the meeting is a phone call with a service user- ensure that sufficient time is allocated and don't fit it into a slot in between another activity. It is more important than ever to ensure that service users and carers feel valued and cared for. Please don't fit in a phone call with a service user whilst in a car park or other venue as it can be received negatively.

In addition, also consider your own physical presentation:

- Ensure that you are dressed professionally for all meetings even if this is just for what is seen on camera. Leisure wear such as sweatshirts or dressing gowns are not appropriate for professional meetings.
- Be aware of ensuring eye contact so adjust your screen to enable others to see you clearly.
- Be aware of your facial expressions and be more aware of the importance of verbally responding as prolonged silences could be more challenging as well as harder to interpret.

During a meeting

- Always clarify the process for any technological difficulties- agree that calls can be re-joined if necessary

- Try to model calm and responsive communication when working with service users so that any glitches can be managed.
- Agree the timescale of the meeting so that everyone is clear.
- At the end of the meeting ensure that everyone has left the meeting. Always leave a meeting and re-join afterwards rather than wait behind to debrief with a colleague as some platforms are more difficult to check whether everyone has left the call.

There are many useful guidelines available on SSSC [COVID-19 information](#) and [specific resources](#), [BASW](#) and [SCIE](#). The following [guidance from Skills for Care](#) provides detailed support about how to conduct a video call from home and is an invaluable resource. Please remember to check local information and advice.

Remote Working & Wellbeing

As you prepare to undertake your student social work placement many of you might find that the working practices of the agencies you are on placement with will be different from what might have been expected. For some of you this may involve remote working or working from home. Below there are some useful links to prepare yourself to work from home and some important considerations on managing this and your wellbeing. For everyone undertaking a student placement, maintaining your wellbeing is important and it is also important to consider this within the content in which we are all working at present due to the coronavirus pandemic. Below are some relevant resources to consider your wellbeing and mental health at this time and over the coming placement period.

Working from home

- The SSSC have offered the following guidance on [working from home](#) which includes thoughts on preparing yourself and your environment and on looking after yourself while working from home
- NHS Education for Scotland has produced some information on [Psychological 1st aid](#) with the focus being on supporting yourself and the people you care for especially when they are experiencing any sort of crisis such as the ongoing pandemic. The whole document will be relevant to thinking about how you work with and support others however section 3 includes information and practical help for people who are caring for others during this stressful time.

Wellbeing for placement in social work

- [IRISS resource on resilience for social workers and social care workers](#)
- [Open University free Open Learn course on supporting and developing resilience in social work](#)
- The [BASW Good Practice Toolkit](#) has been updated to reflect the current COVID-19 situation. The document sets wellbeing within the wider organisational and community environment and you may find it overall an interesting document. In the toolkit, section 1 may be beneficial to read in preparing for your placement and managing your wellbeing during placement.
- [Student minds](#) is a very useful website, the section on managing your mental health and wellbeing with lockdown easing may be useful at this time you will also find links of other great resources and support on their website.
- [National wellbeing hub](#) is also a good place to find resources and support

Further Resources

The below resources have been recommended by some University disability and wellbeing services to support students during this time

[Forest](#) app that helps you stay focused on the important things in life

[Sleep Town](#) app helps build healthy sleeping habits

[Mind](#) mental health information about mindfulness