

## COMMENTARY

# Social Work under COVID-19: A Thematic Analysis of Articles in ‘SW2020 under COVID-19 Magazine’

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## Abstract

This article presents a thematic analysis of 100 articles which appeared in ‘SW2020 under COVID-19’ online magazine, authored by people with lived experience, practitioners, students and academics. The magazine was founded by an editorial collective of the authors of this article and ran as a free online magazine during the period of the first UK COVID-19 lockdown period (March–July 2020). It contained a far higher proportion of submissions from the first three groups of contributors, above, than traditional journals. The analysis is organised under four analytic themes: ‘Hidden populations; Life, loss and hope; Practising differently and Policy and system change’. The article concludes by describing the apparent divergence between accounts that primarily suggest evidence of improved working relationships between social workers and those they serve via digital practices, and accounts suggesting that an increasingly authoritarian social work practice has emerged under COVID-19. We argue that, notwithstanding this divergence, an upsurge in activism within social work internationally

during the pandemic provides a basis for believing that the emergence of a community-situated, socially engaged social work is possible post-pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, critical social work, digital practices, social work activism

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## Introduction

This article presents a thematic analysis of articles which appeared in ‘SW2020 under COVID-19’ (hereafter ‘SW2020’) magazine. This free, online magazine was founded by an editorial collective—the authors of this paper—and ran during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown (March–July 2020). In this time, it published exactly 100 articles from people with lived experience, practitioners, students and academics. It contained a far higher proportion of submissions from the first three groups of contributors than traditional journals. It provided an accessible resource, which allowed people to raise and engage with developments related to social work and COVID-19, without the timelag associated with traditional journal production. The articles remain publicly available: <https://sw2020covid19.group.shef.ac.uk>

An exploration of the process of putting the magazine together, its pedagogical uses and theoretical underpinnings can be found in Sen et al. (2020). Here, we explore key themes arising from content in the magazine. In order to identify themes two members of the editorial collective (R.S. and C.K.) re-read all the articles and summarised the key issues in each. These were then built up into a template of common issues and refined further into the four key themes shown in Table 1 encompassing all the articles. These categorisations were then checked by a third member of the collective (G.M.).

Most articles could have been placed in more than one category. Where this was so, we chose the theme with which the article most strongly aligned. Given word limits, we refer to the articles by the author surname and number of the article as it appeared in order in the magazine, e.g. Park, 36. A full list of these articles and how they link to the themes in Table 1 can be found in Supplementary data. These are distinguished from references to external sources in the article, which are referenced in the conventional way. When taking direct quotations from articles in the magazine please note no page numbers are provided as SW2020 is an online magazine.

### Theme 1: Hidden populations

COVID-19 is highly contagious and no-one is immune. Some of the most powerful individuals caught COVID-19, and sometimes they

**Table 1.** Themes and sub-themes

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1. Hidden populations
  2. Life, loss and hope
  3. Practising differently
    - a. Challenges and dilemmas
    - b. Opportunities in adversity
  4. Policy and system change
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became seriously ill because of it: notably the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson and (then) US President Trump. But, quick access to the best treatment for each also starkly illustrated the inequalities. Inequalities were emphasised by the differential rates with which certain groups both caught and died from COVID-19—amongst these older people, those with disabilities and people from ethnically diverse communities (Bambra *et al.*, 2020; Blundell *et al.*, 2020). The pandemic period also led to widening economic disparities, exacerbating social inequalities through direct and indirect effect (Blundell *et al.*, 2020; Patel *et al.*, 2020) and leading to the memorable call that we must ‘build back fairer’ from the pandemic (Marmot *et al.*, 2020, p. 1, *passim*).

Articles in this first theme linked to the above concerns by highlighting the uneven, and often publicly submerged, impact of COVID-19 on populations served by social workers and allied professions. Implicit in these pieces was also a hope that awareness-raising could be a step towards helping achieving better practice with, and greater social justice for, the groups highlighted.

Jardine (2) discusses the prison population in Scotland, arguing for the criminal justice social work role in raising the needs of this group as we went into lockdown: this could be fulfilled, she argued, by advocating for early release, where possible, and by raising issues about alternatives to face-to-face visitation where it had been curtailed. The devastation in care homes was poignantly covered in five articles. It was argued that this scandal exposed ‘political, structural and societal ageism’ and ‘public and policy ambivalence towards older people’ (Milne, 50). Eccles notes (21) how such the underlying crisis in adult social care could be linked to the multiple impacts of austerity on the capacity to provide social support, allied with heavy speculative investment in care technologies, leaving a sparse human infrastructure to cope. Walker (65) similarly attributes responsibility for the devastating impact of COVID-19 on older people in the UK to the current administration, identifying this as ‘institutional ageism’. In contrast, the Greek administration acted quickly to implement a strict lockdown, shortly after the country’s first

recorded death in early March 2020 (Skoura-Kirk, 40). Skoura-Kirk argues that while both the UK and Greek Governments' responses betrayed elements of 'othering', the Greek Government's also articulated the need to protect older people due to their inherent value as members of society. This stood in notable contrast to the UK Government's response. Nieman (62) suggests the othering of older people can be born of a benign impulse— 'compassionate ageism'—but one which ultimately reinforces a paternalism which undermines rights-based social work.

A number of articles focussed on the underlying politics of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on ethnically diverse communities (see also, [Bambra et al., 2020](#)). Reid (99) excoriates racial hatred and white privilege in verse homage inspired by Gil Scott-Heron, while Rajan-Rankin (27) highlights how the impact of COVID-19 was magnified by the legacies of austerity and chronic underfunding of the National Health Service (NHS), leading to greater social inequalities based around ethnicity. Griffiths (35), writing as 'someone who is from a south Asian Muslim background and gay', describes the impact of austerity, socio-economic equality and social exclusion on outcomes for ethnically diverse communities under COVID-19.

Another chronically excluded group, disproportionality impacted by COVID-19, were people with disabilities. They were noticeably absent from early governmental pandemic discourses. Hoskin and Finch (54) describe how attitudes to the expendability of disabled people's lives mirror attitudes to those in care homes—including reports of the indiscriminate issue of 'Do Not Resuscitate' consent request letters to the families of people with learning disabilities. Bond (6) notes the exclusion of deaf people in the UK Government's own early public health announcements, asking '(w)ho enforces the Equality Act if the Government cannot or will not book interpreters?'. She highlights the stark contrast with other governments whose press announcements had been rendered more accessible by sign language interpreters. The lack of accessible COVID-19 information for Deaf people with additional needs was similarly highlighted by Redfern and Baker (90). Simcock (56) explains why a focus on 'physical distancing' rather than 'social distancing' is problematic for deafblind people, who rely on touch for communication and connection to the people and the world around them.

A sub-theme on which a number of articles focused was populations whose concerns, life situations and needs risked even greater marginalisation during the pandemic. One group in this category were those subject to domestic violence. [Mahase \(2020\)](#) notes the World Health Organisation reported a 60 percent increase in emergency calls from women subjected to intimate partner violence in European Member States since the onset of the pandemic. Detjen (82) reflects on the effects of gender based violence at a time when only those situations

deemed 'high risk' were being physically visited by social workers. She raises concerns about the children involved and the increased strain that lockdown has placed on already vulnerable families. Similarly, MacIntyre and Stewart (29) describe how women with learning disabilities, experiencing gender based violence, are at far greater risk of loneliness and isolation. Their research reports a sense of loss among these women, whose pathway through a complex series of services and systems had been put on hold.

Another group who have faced heightened risk during the pandemic are parents experiencing child to parent violence and abuse (Coggins and Lauster, 52). This is a particularly sensitive area that is often highly stigmatised. COVID-19 has heightened the tensions and pressures that such families have experienced, with little prospect of the break or disruption afforded by pre-pandemic routines, such as going to school or work or spending time out of the home with friends. Some families who experienced strain or trauma prior to the pandemic will, therefore, have seen this increase.

Hadwin (5) raised concerns about the service and policy responses towards unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people leaving care during the pandemic. She calls for more humane responses, urging the suspension or modification of age assessments to allow appeals, and appropriate support for those entering adult services. A series of loosely linked, raw, but hopeful articles were written by the Common Threads collective of birth families separated by adoption, supported by professionals. These articles articulated the ongoing pain of loss, wondering, yearning and not knowing (39, 46, 59, 98). They emphasise how the pandemic exacerbated the pain of separation due to the lack of knowledge about how particular family members were faring under COVID-19. Alongside this hardship, the pieces conveyed enduring love over time, and an ability to cope with the challenges of separation, even as the yearning to know birth parents or birth children burned fiercely.

Mental distress has also been exacerbated by the pandemic and Jackman (43) writes powerfully of how experiences of lockdown negatively impacted his mental health when he lost a sessional academic job, and the accompanying income. Wider literature suggests the pandemic is likely to have reinforced health inequalities by exacerbating pre-existing mental health problems, particularly anxiety disorders, and that relapse rates across all conditions have increased (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2020). Despite the unequal effects of lockdown, many people have also found hope in a sense of collectivism: as Jackman highlights, 'sharing common and collective concerns over the phone with people has been an empathic unifier'.

Four other articles articulated concerns that important contributions, achievements and issues were going underacknowledged during the pandemic. Smeeton notes how the contribution of social work as a

profession was hidden compared to that of medical staff, calling for the profession's leadership to celebrate this role more. The overlooking of care experienced people (Mike S, 55) and the promised English Care Review (Radoux, 31) were also raised: the latter had been promised in the Conservative Party election manifesto of 2019, but further details had not been announced by the time of the article. Radoux describes how, as a care experienced person working in residential care, he organised an open letter sent to the Secretary of State for Education in January 2020, signed by 642 people in the UK. This called for the promised English Review to be a systematic and fully independent one, similar to that held in Scotland. Moore (92) outlined her positive experiences, as a care experienced person, in a central role in the three-year Scottish Care Review from 2017 to 2020. The English Review has now been announced by the UK Government, with a controversial chair, Josh MacAlister, formerly CEO of Frontline (see 'Theme 4' below). His independence from the Department of Education has been strongly questioned by a number of people, including Radoux himself. The third overlooked issue, highlighted by Cardy (17), was that of the National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS) for child and family social workers in England. The scheme's merit and expense has been questioned. Cardy presents a detailed deconstruction of the ways in which NAAS had been promoted, with little evident gain to social work practice.

## Life, loss and hope

The colours on the palette of human experience changed as the relentlessness of illness and death, alongside the economic and social hardships of lockdown, became central to our consciousness. Hope was still evident within the palette as exemplified in the 'Friday Story' (Marquez-Leaman and Fisher, 10), which has simultaneously modest and ambitious aims of narrating snapshots of lived experience connected to social work. In one part of this Friday story, Faye reflects on her life-long friendship with a previous social worker who worked with her and her mother from her birth. A questioning hope within the everyday pandemic experience is also evident in a connected series of outputs by Michael Clarke consisting of an article and three vlogs (12, 33, 45, 63). In these, he articulates his experiences as a young care leaver living by himself under lockdown in a way which resonates. In the first vlog (33), Clarke speaks of the experience of lockdown as a learning process and wonders with the world 'being stopped. what's everyone going to do when it starts spinning again?'. In the second (45), he discusses the distance created between humans by the wearing of masks but also identifies acts of everyday solidarity during this period, through which people can start to reconnect.

Waters (15) wryly reflects on how certain taken-for-granted jobs were suddenly lauded as key working roles under lockdown. She also notes how those with additional health and social care needs seemed to be forgotten in early UK Government announcements. This has though led, she posited, to a growing public realisation that '[t]here should never have been a social divide or avoidable fear and avoidable hardship like this.' Price's two poems (78) also find positives. One, inspired by the 'Black Lives Matter' protests after George Floyd's killing, articulates the case for those not directly affected to show solidarity with the 'rights of others'; the second conveys the sense that, despite the many challenges, COVID-19 has led to greater co-operation and an improvement in the public mood. Yusuf McCormack (60) wrote insightfully about the day to day challenges in fostering two children during the pandemic. Characteristically, he found hope in the creative responses which might address these: in one example he describes how platforms like video chat and WhatsApp provide ways to positively conduct 'family time' between birth family members and the children, in ways that have distinct advantages.

Insightful reflection and creativity about the everyday was also the focus of two articles by academics. The first describes an innovative poetry project for social workers, highlighting the role of poetry as a 'method to comfort, sustain, soothe, and educate' (Critchley and Roesch-Marsh, 37). Collins (75) advocates for the use of art in social work as an act of resistance. He argues for the role of the arts as a tool to 'trouble, antagonise, frustrate and subvert dominant social structures and power imbalances'.

A pandemic accentuates the risks to life and the possibility of death more than at other times. The magazine carried two sad, but beautiful, obituaries. Both emphasised loss alongside the hope we can take from remembering the brilliant lives they described. The first obituary was to a much respected, assured but faultlessly kind and supportive Senior Lecturer in Social work, Dr Michele Raithby (Quinn-Aziz, Beech and Karen, 19). The second was to a much loved friend, Becca, who worked as an NHS nurse for NHS 111, and who died after contracting COVID-19 early in the lockdown period (Park, 36). Memories of them shine brightly on.

### **Theme 3: Practising differently**

A number of pieces documented, reflected on and analysed how practices, and the lives underpinning them, had changed or, in some cases, might change in light of COVID-19. There was considerable divergence in the experience of such changes, and the views of them. Some articles emphasised practice challenges and dilemmas more than opportunities—

albeit with underlying hope—while others more emphasised opportunities in adversity. Accordingly, we sub-divide this section into those two sub-themes.

## Challenges and dilemmas of practice

The lack of provision and clarity about Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for social workers was raised in two submissions (McGowan, 30; Monaghan, 11), whilst Burke (13) also identified the risks a lack of PPE posed to families whom social workers visited. Burke was highly critical of the absence of management communication around the need for such visits. A cartoon by Grimm (38) illustrates the multiple pressures on social workers during the first lockdown: ‘stress’ ‘panick’, ‘sick friends’, exhaustion, a lack of time for their own families combined with the overlooking of social workers’ contributions provide a poignant characterisation of the social worker under COVID-19 as ‘Essential but Left-behind’.

Banks and colleagues’ article considers early findings from an international study of social work ethics during COVID-19. It helps identify some of the practice dilemmas which came to the fore (Banks *et al.*, 93). These are noted to include how to build trust and relationships without face-to-face interaction; whether to continue following formal guidance which may not be adequately sensitive to the new realities of COVID-19; prioritising the needs of different individuals and families in crisis; balancing these needs against the welfare of the workforce; and acknowledging the need for emotional self-care within the social work workforce.

A number of articles identified the ways the digital divide presented barriers to accessing services. Lockdowns would have been so much harder in a pre-Internet age. The move to greater digital existences, however, starkly excludes those without access to this online world. Roesch-Marsh (26) raises the issue of digital access for careleavers and Evans (77) children and young people’s digital rights more broadly: each suggests the responsibilities that social workers have in promoting access. Digital access for families was also raised. The APLE collective (20) illustrated there were still messages of hope to be had in spirited examples of local community solidarity. These examples were noted to be helping keep poorer families going during lockdown. However, the collective also noted the barriers to family participation, information and well-being caused by digital poverty. Bowser (70) reflected on his experience of pandemic practice in Northern Ireland. While noting positives, he also cautions against quixotic pronouncements about the use of technology in social work practice going forward. Where he saw this use working well during the first lockdown, he notes it was underpinned by



pre-existing strong relationships. Bowser also calls for broadband to be treated as a public utility going forward. Wider commentaries noted how the underlying discourse that we were ‘all in it together’ discounted the impact of structural factors during the pandemic: these were noted to include family size, digital access and home size (Gibson, 18), transport infrastructure and whether or not people still had to use public transport during lockdown (Withers, 66).

All Together in Dignity Fourth World’s (ATD) interview (51) with Annie (‘Surviving Safeguarding’) struck several cautionary notes about family experiences of social work under lockdown. Annie reported that she had received contact from families who were deeply troubled by the suspension of care proceedings, without notification of when they might resume; from those who were concerned about the suspension of family time visits for children in care; and parents who were worried about how to meet social workers’ unrealistic expectations of them, while living in extreme poverty, with children unexpectedly out of school.

### Opportunities in adversity

The following pieces were more focussed on opportunities within the adversity which COVID-19 led to. They articulated ways in which the pandemic had created space for enacting positive practice changes in the present, or for considering them moving forward. Dove’s experiences (22) as a family support practitioner provide an illustration of the hope that still shone through hugely difficult circumstances. She documents the lynchpin roles being played by individual community activists and community organisations in an area she serves—these acts of communitarianism helping ensure isolated local families both had caring support and practical help during lockdown. Dove pointedly articulates the lessons of this for ‘building back fairer’ moving out of lockdown: that families should have access to effective and caring family support ‘[n]ot just during a pandemic. All the time.’ Zyweck, Davis and Devine (32) describe how their team was re-evaluating their approach to child and family social work, reconfiguring it so that the ‘care/control’ dichotomy is re-balanced more towards one of care. Similarly, two social workers described how social work practice was creatively responding to social distancing and relational engagement online (Anonymous, 1, Joe 8) the latter reflecting that online formats can make in-depth engagement with families more difficult, but also allow practitioners greater opportunity to observe self-presentation ‘in action’. A Newly Qualified Social Worker (McGuinness, 83) detailed challenges in starting a new job online in a pandemic, but this account also carries a sense of learning, contribution and achievement. Similarly, Orr describes how practice may be positively reconfigured within a young people’s service in Scotland, learning

from the challenges of trying to respond to families' needs during the pandemic (25).

The practice developments described, or advocated for, in the magazine display some of the variety and also similarities of the social work role internationally. The social work lead of an NHS neuro-rehabilitation service for people with traumatic brain injuries in England described team learning in the rapid set up and roll out of a specialist hospital discharge team to counter the pressures on the local system (Brownlee, 87). In another call to use the pandemic as an opportunity to develop practice for the better, Everard (64) advocates for changes in social work record keeping such that it respects children, young people and families' rights to see, know and 'own' that which is written about them. Lifang Wang (84) described social work responses to the challenges of working in Wuhan—the Chinese province where COVID-19 was first found. The difficulties of trying to find hospital beds, the developing social work role in providing practical and emotional support to COVID-19 patients in hospital, and the dilemmas of supporting those waiting for a hospital bed are articulated. Similarly to Banks *et al.* (93), Wang emphasises the need to provide supervision and emotional support to frontline social workers during the pandemic. The experience of a social work team supporting patients experiencing COVID-19 in the Sheba Medical Center, Israel, had some interesting parallels: the work here included mediation between patients and medical teams, and the provision of practical and emotional support to patients (Chen and Abramovich, 100).

Ahmed (16) reflects on the organic nature of change in organisations in response to the pandemic. She argues this liberated social workers to exercise their judgement so they could help people at a time of crisis. In a later paper (58), she explores the use of compassionate supervision to allow acknowledgment of emotions and discussion at a more meaningful level, resulting in action: examples included adjusting someone's working hours due to their caring responsibilities, and an organisational adjustment to policies around special leave. Williamson (85) reflects on the challenges of leading a social work team during the pandemic. She notes how she prioritised keeping families and workers safe reflecting that 'complex decision making is best guided by values, ethics and principles...being honest, authentic and listening'. This article reflects on the challenges of creating a culture that values relationships within an overly bureaucratic social work system focused on risk. Addressing this involves greater acceptance of uncertainty and risk, and the striking of a healthy balance between concern for families and concern for social workers' well-being. Rutter (88) describes how the lockdown had improved the lives of some children with autism, whose parents were reporting that they were happier and less anxious away from the challenges of school during lockdown. This leads to the reflection that, while home schooling

is not a long-term option for some parents of autistic children, these experiences suggest the need for a rethink of education provision for these children going forward.

A number of student contributions struck an upbeat note. Salter (61) wrote about the key ingredients of the ‘professional curiosity cake’ as a way of encapsulating her self-learning and self-reflection during the pandemic. Ormsby’s (44) paean to pride in the profession and its student workforce unfolded in jaunty couplets celebrating the end of a university social work programme in a celebratory fashion online—as might have similarly happened face-to-face in other times: ‘Ulster University, have showed us how it’s done—We are ready and I’m proud of everyone!’ Other student pieces struck a more contemplative tone but still emphasised the silver linings of facing up to the challenges COVID-19 entailed. Francis (48) reflected on how the difficult news of the pandemic and lockdown was punctuated by personal concern about how she might achieve her dream of qualifying as a social worker: a clear resoluteness to achieve her goal and make a contribution as a social worker still underpins the piece. The Social Work Student Connect Team with MacLean (97) highlight the benefits and opportunities afforded by technologies to bring people together for mutual support, learning and development. An apprentice social worker (69) reflected on what they were missing in the pandemic but offered hope as they described adapting to a rapidly evolving environment. Finally, Dewar and Akingbulu (94) reflect on the differences between statutory and third sector student placements at a time when many statutory social work placements had been suspended. They argue statutory social work appears to have been ‘paralysed’ by the structural and procedural constraints of new public management, while the third sector offers greater opportunity to practice alongside individuals, families and communities to challenge oppressive state structures.

Relatedly, social work educators wrote about the challenges of supporting student learning during this period (Beesley, 34; Durham MSW Collective, 28). These pieces emphasised the solutions which had been found to challenges, but in so doing also illustrated some of the complex practice dilemmas within social work during this period. The University of Durham MSW course (28) described their choice, as the UK entered the first lockdown, to enable students to continue in their placements. Their rationale was that this allowed students to support individuals and families at a time of real need, while also facilitating students to progress towards qualification. Lockdown also saw moves to online classroom learning. A social work educator notes the successful adjustment to using technology to assess student skills via online role plays (Hall, 96). Malcolm (67) and Bruce (72) reflect on the pedagogical and practical benefits of the move to online teaching and learning, based on their

experiences as a staff member and student, respectively, in a Canadian university.

Another cause for hope was the return to activism among many social workers discussed by Cioarta (41), although, similarly to Grimm (38) and Smeeton (9) he observes that social workers' contribution was often unacknowledged: this leads to the memorable quip that some heroes also have the power of invisibility! Cioarta argues that social workers have an important role to play as 'connectors', working with other professionals and communities to promote grassroots responses to the pandemic. As noted above, the implications of the digital divide require the profession's—as well as the government's—urgent action and a number of pieces illustrated how newer technology could be used to support and connect during the pandemic, when it was available. Yavnai and Lafreniere (91) discuss the innovative platforms that community organisers have turned to in order to promote their work, referring to this as 'covid activism' or 'caremongering'. They provide many examples of online groups that have been set up to provide care and support on a virtual basis. A mother (49, *Yourgirlpower*) describes the way that she and her teenage daughter, living in a residential unit at some distance, had been supported to maintain connection during lockdown via FaceTime and telephone calls, after lockdown prevented face-to-face visits. An organisation supporting careleavers highlighted how many of the socialising activities they ran had continued online, with other activities being adapted to recognise the increased time careleavers were spending at home (Ferguson and McInroy, 80). Mitchell and Ali (86) illustrated, using a family example, how the participative and empowering nature of Family Group Conferences has been sustained by successfully adapting the process to social distancing and online meetings. We conclude this section with Sheenan's article (79) on hope. Such a focus should, he argues, be considered a radical act in a pandemic. Reflecting on one's 'best hopes' at this challenging time can offer the motivation to keep going and a call to action to take the steps necessary to ensure those hopes are realised. He adds that the most useful role a social worker can play is not to give others hope, but to ask them to bring their own.

#### **Theme 4: Policy and system change**

The opportunity to think about how to build back fairer has been tempered by the realisation that hardships have continued under the pandemic, and the sobering revelations that the pandemic has in fact exacerbated social inequalities. In turn, this focuses attention on the need for systemic and structural change. Several articles grappled with these concerns. Bilson and Drayak (68) provide an excoriating critique of the child welfare system in the UK based on academic analyses of an

increasingly investigative child welfare system, its disproportionate effects on poorer and ethnically diverse families, and personal experience of this system. Three other papers made suggestions as to what might replace it. Featherstone *et al.* (23) developed arguments from Featherstone *et al.* (2018) regarding development of a social model of protecting children. They argue the pandemic has made the need for this model even more pressing. Forrester (53) draws on Fox Harding's (2014) classic categorisation of values positions within welfare intervention in family life, initially developed in the early 1990s. He highlights the harm that social work intervention can cause families and argues for the re-conceptualisation of 'radical non-intervention'—social workers staying out of family life as much as possible—as something more than the right-wing, laissez-faire position with which it is associated. Featherstone *et al.* replied in a later edition (71). They welcomed the shared desire for systemic change in child welfare, but raise an important distinction between social work support *per se*, and high tariff intervention. Consequently, their call is for 'the state to be bigger and yet smaller, closer to home', and they argue for 'robust social protections and a re-imagining of the promise of the welfare state'.

The significant policy and legal changes enacted during the pandemic were, though, very different to these imagined futures. The role and reach of the state did increase via both economic aid and restrictions on civil liberties instituted by the UK Government following the start of the pandemic. The Government's willingness to massively increase public debt marked a sharp departure from the ideological rationalities of austerity politics during the previous decade. It was noted how this spending undermined the Conservative Party's prior claims that severe public spending cuts and welfare residualisation had been economically necessary, rather than a political choice (Sen, 14). While the lockdown restrictions on civil liberties appeared to be largely accepted by the general population in the UK, McKendrick and Finch (24) voice concern that the 'securitisation turn' within social work has been given further impetus through them. They note that the reassuring welfarist-discourse surrounding lockdown legislation smoothed over the realities of some of the most draconian restrictions on civil liberties the UK has seen. They question whether this will add impetus to the increasingly investigative character of social work practice going forward.

With respect to the legal and policy frameworks governing social work practices directly, Willow (3) identified at the start of lockdown a concern that the UK Government may be trying to use the pandemic as cover for removing social protections in England. Willow raised the removal of local authority duties to meet the needs of disabled adults in England (the benignly titled Care Act 'easements') as well as changes to provision for children with Special Educational Needs in the Coronavirus Act of March 2020. Sidhu (57) noted the 'easements' were

justified by Government due to the need to expedite services, yet risked leaving vulnerable populations in significant debt longer term. She also describes how the Coronavirus Act suspended the need for Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards for changes to care or treatment. Notably, Willow's article was written a few weeks before the introduction of Statutory Instrument 445 ('SI445') as described in Sen (47). SI445 overnight 'temporarily' removed 65 legal protections and safeguards for children in care in England for an initial six-month period. The leadership of the social work profession had some role in this undermining of social protections in England: the joint Chief Social Workers for Adults advised the UK Government that the 'easements' should continue, while it emerged the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families had helped facilitate the introduction of SI445. The campaign to rescind SI445 was a vociferous, and ultimately successful, one gathering wide support in the children's social work sector and far beyond. Much of the campaign momentum was gathered online, underlining the role online technology can play in facilitating activism. Willow did more than any other single individual to defeat SI445. The organisation she directs, Article 39, eventually obtained a Court of Appeal judgment ruling that the introduction of SI445 had been illegal as the Government had failed to properly consult with the Children's Commissioner for England and other children's rights organisations ('*R (on the application of Article 39) vs. Secretary of State for Education*', [2020] EWCA Civ 1577).

The unhealthy close relationships between large corporations and the UK Government were brought further into focus during the pandemic. The UK Government is alleged to have awarded lucrative contracts totalling over £1 billion to private firms, out with normal procurement processes and oversight (Hansard, 2020). Both Cardy (95) and Kerr (74) consider the influence of management consultancies and global corporations within social work and social work educational reform. One of these organisations, Boston Consulting Group (BCG), is already represented in many state social work departments via its links with Frontline, a fast-track qualifying social work course in England focused on child and family social work. BCG charged the UK government over £10 million for four months' work on the controversial test and trace scheme (Jolly and Syal, 2020). Hanley (81) notes how the mantra of the 'brightest and the best' has permeated social work via Frontline, and another fast track qualifying social work course, Think Ahead, focused around mental health practice. The schemes, as well as the teacher training programmes which influenced them, argue these professions can be transformed by attracting the 'brightest' graduates into them from the 'best' universities. Hanley questions the compatibility of such elitist notions with social work's purposes and values.

The macro, structural, concerns of poverty and food insecurity are the focus of two student submissions (Mohamed, 89; Watters, 76) while

another student, Pitt (73) called for the re-politicisation of social work in pursuit of building stronger relationships between social workers and the people they support. These articles symbolise the hope, dynamism and commitment that was evidenced more broadly in a burgeoning social work activism during the Summer of 2020. Connecting the macro to the micro was a current in three non-student authored pieces. Warner (7) and Kerr (4) posit the rise of mutual aid under COVID-19 as inviting consideration of a change in the way social workers conceive of the relationship between social work practice, collective action and activism. Webber (42) explores what this practice could look like, positing a new community social work that draws on previous conceptions of community organising, development and support, but which also taps into the hyper-localisation of life under lockdown. Responding to the disillusionment with individualism, neoliberalism and unfettered market forces, he argues such practice should seek to create ‘place-based services which are a part of, and accountable to, their local communities’. Warner makes a similar clarion call for social work to re-engage: ‘Now is the moment for us to realise that our value to society is best judged by our proximity to communities—however messy this return to the local might be.’

## Discussion and conclusion

We focus here on what may have been happened to ‘social work under COVID-19’. Starting with commonalities, life changed significantly for both those receiving and providing social work services internationally. The exact nature of these changes and challenges, as reflected in magazine articles, was heavily influenced by the local contexts in different countries (e.g. Chen and Abramovich, 100; Dove, 22; Skoura-Kirk, 40; Wang, 84). However, there were also common features to some of these experiences. The articles evidence the pain of death and illness during a pandemic, the pressure on social work services, the increased challenges of finding resources to meet people’s core needs and the widening, rather than narrowing of, exclusion and inequalities. These observations are consistent with international evidence (e.g. [Bambra et al., 2020](#); [Banks et al., 2020](#); [Blundell et al., 2020](#); [Patel et al., 2020](#)) showing the disproportionate social impacts of COVID-19 on populations served by social workers both directly via impacts on health, and indirectly via economic effects.

The underlying impact of COVID-19 on social work practices is less clear, with divergent experiences in evidence. As the context we are most familiar with, and which was most heavily represented in magazine coverage, we focus this set of comments on the UK context. However, it should be noted that the emergent evidence suggests some analogous

tensions are to be found in social work practice internationally (Amadasun, 2020; Banks et al., 2020). One set of magazine articles suggested practitioners, carers and family members had found pandemic social work practice to have evident advantages for engagement. Another set illustrated how the digital divide could impact poorer families, care-leavers and other marginalised groups. There were also more specific concerns about the robustness of virtual social work assessments. These divergences resonate with the emergent UK literature around virtual pandemic social work practice. On the one hand, the possibilities of relational engagement and the enactment of digital intimacies, which may not have been feasible offline, are illustrated by two early studies (Cook and Zschomler, 2020; Pink et al., 2020). On the other, there is evidence that parents had markedly different experiences of virtual practice, finding it disempowering and exclusionary (Baginsky et al., 2020). Some commentators even raise the concern that more surveillant, punitive and investigatory social work practices towards families may have developed during the pandemic (Dillon et al., 2021; McKendrick and Finch, 21).

An underlying question is whether some families may have fared better with lower levels of direct social work contact under lockdown. Evidence of an increase in domestic violence during lockdown, as well as concerns about missed harm to children as referrals to children's services reduced (Bhopal et al., 2021; Mahase 2020), may strongly suggest otherwise. However, it should be acknowledged that there was also some indication that children and young people's stress levels decreased in England as the lockdown progressed (Children's Commissioner, 2020), and there is some anecdotal evidence that particular groups of children with enhanced needs, may have been happier and more relaxed under lockdown (e.g. Rutter, 88). We caution that further exploration of these issues is needed before conclusions are drawn about the wider implications for service reconfiguration or delivery. It is also important to recognise that it may be impossible to ever clearly determine empirically whether children and families were better, or worse, off during the pandemic 'due to' decreased levels of social work involvement, given changes to other social and situational pressures which may have been influential in this period—for example, those relating to school, peer groups and local communities.

There is evidence of a renewed activism, solidarity and communitarianism related to how people are thinking about social work in light of COVID-19. New practices emphasising flexibility, creativity and a focus on forging alliances between practitioners, individuals, families and communities are a cause for optimism. Families, activists, social workers and other concerned citizens have also illustrated the possibilities of resisting some of the more concerning organisational and government practices and policies that have emerged under COVID-19. The emergent 'everyday activism' of which we speak here had a strong online presence and



SW2020 can be seen as an example of it. This activism sought, and sometimes succeeded, in effecting wider change within social work practices and policies (Sen *et al.*, 2020). Does such activism herald the re-emergence of a radical and critically engaged social work in the period ahead? This remains to be seen as the political, economic and systemic contexts enveloping social work post-pandemic start to emerge. Perhaps, for now, it is enough that they provide a basis for hope as we enter that period.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *British Journal of Social Work Journal* online.

## Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated, with respect, to the memory of one of the contributors to SW2020, Yusuf McCormack, 1963–2021, who recently passed away after contracting COVID-19. He told, and taught us, to ‘be the difference’.

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