

BRIEFING TO THE JUDICIAL INSTITUTE ON THE CURRENT IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON JUSTICE SOCIAL WORK

1 April 2020

Social Work Scotland is the professional body for social work leaders, working closely with our partners to shape policy and practice, and improve the quality and experience of social services. That has never been more true than in the past month, where we have collaborated with national partners to identify issues and assess the impact of COVID-19, and develop (and now implement) appropriate contingencies. In this we have drawn heavily on the local intelligence provided by members of our Justice Social Work (JSW) Standing Committee.

Discussions are ongoing with Scottish Government in respect of the emergency legislation contained in the Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill for community orders and agreeing business continuity and priorities. On 20 March 2020 the Scottish Government's Chief Social Work Adviser and Director of Community Justice issued a joint letter to local authority Chief Social Work Officers, providing assurance and guidance on key issues.¹ Separately, an agreement had been reached with Parole Board Scotland regarding streamlining of the parole process and arrangements for oral and tribunal hearings,² and with the Scottish Prison Service concerning prison-based social work and priorities.

Whilst each local authority is responding to their own local circumstances, in respect of the **impact COVID-19 is having on JSW** the following points are of note:

- JSW is identifying and prioritising the management of higher risk of harm and vulnerable individuals subject to community payback orders (CPO), drug testing and treatment orders (DTTO) and prison licences.
- Continuing to provide criminal justice social work reports (CJSWR) remains a priority notwithstanding the impact of restricted access to both JSW offices and prisons – see below. In many instances report interviews are being conducted by telephone where this is appropriate to do so.

¹ Scottish Government (20.03.2020) [COVID-19 Business Continuity and Service Prioritisation for Justice Social Work Services](#).

² PBS and SWS (25.03.2020) [Joint Letter on Updated Parole Arrangements](#)

- Most, if not all, Unpaid Work operations have been suspended. This is to protect the health & safety of both staff and individuals on orders (e.g. social distancing) and the current lockdown.
- For similar reasons (staff capacity, health and safety, etc.) group work relating to the Moving Forward: Making Changes sex offender programme and the Caledonian System domestic abuse programme have been suspended. This also applies to other groups such as those for women and other types of group work programmes. Ongoing detailed guidance is being issued to Caledonian workers on which elements of the 1:1 stage of the programme can be done safely by phone and should be done to mitigate heightened risks during lockdown. The safety planning work with partners of men on the programme is being continued by phone or video call.
- The management of individuals subject to the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) continues. However, routine MAPPA reviews are being conducted by video- or teleconferencing and business is being prioritised according to risk. This includes managing the risk of prisoners being released at the end of their sentence.
- Sustaining the parole process is a priority given the limited flexibility available to Parole Board Scotland (PBS). A short-read parole report has been agreed between PBS and Social Work Scotland, focusing on the basic JSW information required to inform their decisions.
- Prison-based social work continues to operate, prioritising statutory work. However, some teams are no longer able to access prison-based offices with a concomitant impact on this work and access to prisoners; a further limitation is that Scottish Prison Service (SPS) information systems cannot be accessed remotely by JSW; however, SPS are in the process of rapidly putting in place a workaround to allow this.
- Visiting prisons is increasingly difficult, and the rising demand for video- and teleconferencing facilities has encountered practical and technological problems. SPS are working hard to facilitate meetings either physically or remotely wherever possible, but the restrictions are having an impact on certain processes, such as the production of court reports for individuals remanded in custody.
- Many areas, but not all, have withdrawn court services and redeployed staff to cover other duties. JSW remain committed to being available for the provision of bail supervision assessments and other essential duties if required.
- JSW offices have been closed in some areas with staff redeployed to work from home; in others, a skeleton rota of staff is being maintained to ensure business continuity as far as possible and allow for health and safety (i.e. social distancing).

- The reporting of individuals on orders and licences for face-to-face contact is significantly reduced and restricted to where there are concerns about risk and need. Where necessary, individuals will be seen in offices (if open) or home visits conducted in accordance with the guidance regarding safe coronavirus practice.
- For many individuals, monitoring and compliance of orders is now being conducted by telephone interview or, where the technology is available, using video platforms (e.g. Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp). Some local authorities, are experiencing difficulties rolling this out widely as their social workers do not have access to laptops or smart phones; and for those working at home local IT networks are often struggling as they were not designed to cope with such a high level of demand for home working.
- The delivery of National Outcomes & Standards for social work services in the justice system and associated practice guidance have, by necessity, had to be relaxed with resources being allocated in accordance with risk and need. This has been agreed with Scottish Government.
- As the number of Sheriff Courts operating has reduced the numbers of CJSWRs is reducing and many courts are stipulating that CPOs will not commence until later in the year. This is immensely helpful.

Consideration is already being given to planning for the end of the crisis. This may entail significant demand on JSW as business returns to normal, with delayed orders commencing and the backlog of work starting to work its way through the justice system, requiring reports and leading to new orders. Additional resources may be required to meet this demand, and medium-term plans may need to be put in place to spread the burden of activity across a realistic timescale. This will be the subject of ongoing discussion with Scottish Government.

During the COVID-19 pandemic justice social work will continue to maintain critical services wherever possible. Continuing to manage offenders in order to keep communities safe and reduce the risk of reoffending remain top priorities, alongside supporting vulnerable people and promoting social inclusion.

For further information, please do not hesitate to contact:

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