TOP TIPS

For Relationship Based Social Work in the Context of Digital Transformation

Part of BASW England's 80-20 Campaign

80-20

Campaign
Promoting relationship
based practice

BASW England
The professional association for
social work and social workers

Introduction

BASW England's 80-20 campaign is all about time for social work. To support the sector, a series of Top Tips resources have been created with BASW members, people with lived experience and key stakeholders from across the sector.

Social workers continue to tell us that too much of their time is spent on administrative tasks and not enough time is spent on direct relationship based social work and reflective practice.[1] Following the Covid-19 pandemic and advances in digitisation, the profession faces new and additional challenges to maintaining a relationship-based approach to practice.[2]

Context

Organisations such as local authorities and integrated care boards along with social workers are embracing digital technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems that minimise administration and business functions, however AI must never replace relationship based social work practice. It is important to acknowledge that at the time of publishing these Top Tips resources there was no national regulation of the use of AI.[3]

BASW will continue to call for the regulation of AI, a national framework of ethical principles and promotion and awareness raising of the use of AI, and for the production of easy access information to members of the public about when AI applications are being used and by which industries to ensure accountability to citizens and to uphold human rights.

The BASW England 80:20 campaign champions relationship based social work practice and direct work in order to build and sustain relationships with children, young people, adults, families and communities. Positive, meaningful relationships are vital to well-being. Relationships have the power to transform lives.[4]

What is this resource?

Therapeutic, reflective, relationship-based practice is the best way for social workers to bring effective and positive change to the lives of children, families and adults and communities.

The Top Tips for Relationship Based Social Work in the Context of Digital Transformation sets out some of the challenges and opportunities and presents top tips for social workers applicable at every stage in their career. Tips include what needs to be in place to develop, support and embed relationship-based practice rooted in human contact and connection, enabling time for social work.

Who is it for?

Social workers, team managers, senior and organisational leaders, employers, children, young people, adults and families and key stakeholders.

How can it be used?

Flexibly. This Top Tips resource can be used to reflect on working practices and digitalisation in a range of settings and contexts to see how well supported social workers, teams and services are and to consider what needs to change to create time for direct work and relationship-based practice.

The Top Tips resource can also be used to campaign and lobby for change in conjunction with the other 80:20 campaign Top Tips resources or by itself.

Top Tips ▶▶▶

1 **Champion relationship based practice through human connection**

- Building human connections is the core of social work. REMEMBER: **70-93% of all communication is non-verbal** – When face-to-face interactions are replaced with digital ones, we are missing out on a huge amount of information.
- We are social beings. Connection through relationships is crucial for growth and development at all life stages. Loss of human connection can lead to increased levels of loneliness, anxiety and disengagement.[5] Social workers need to be able to pick up on the normal social cues, a vital skill that can only be fully utilised in the physical world.
- Creating opportunities to identify and discuss issues with individuals, families and communities, identifying how people are feeling and making time for this is integral to good relationship based social work.
- AI must never replace relationship based social work practice. Choices and options, including human contact and digital ways of interacting need to be discussed and explored.
- Being alert to the risks associated with AI first contact options.[6]

2 Poverty aware practice, digital exclusion and inequality

- Interfacing with systems can come with barriers for already marginalised groups.
- Inbuilt bias in algorithms run the risk of being inherently racist, sexist and being developed based on other forms of oppression and discrimination.[7]
- Certain groups may be excluded from the digital world. This can be linked to digital poverty as well as access issues. Not only in terms of owning a device, but managing subscriptions, paying for electricity and Wi-Fi and having the knowledge, skills and confidence to be able to use technology and communicate through it.[8]
- Individuals and communities may experience particular challenges when asking for help or trying to access services using digital systems. This includes people with a learning disability, people who are neurodivergent, older people, those with communication needs including sight and hearing loss.
- Social workers must not collude with digital exclusion. Highlighting the possible challenges that may be experienced by marginalised groups and the potential for inequalities to be reinforced. Social workers need to speak up and take an intersectional perspective.[9]

3 Digitalisation and technology can be enablers to relationship based social work practice — THEY ARE NOT THE DRIVER

- The use of Artificial Intelligence in the creation of content such as email, case notes, assessment and review documentation require careful consideration by social workers from an ethical perspective. Just because a tool is available does not mean it should be used. A critical approach is required.[10]
- The application of professional judgement by social workers at every stage is fundamental. Evaluating how digital solutions and technology are being promoted and used.[11]
- There are many ethical considerations in the use of AI including safeguarding, confidentiality, the right to privacy, how personal data is used and stored, including by subsidiary companies and how informed consent is truly ascertained by the children, young people and adults that social workers work with.[12]
- Consideration needs to be given to initial and ongoing contact with individuals and families. How do digital systems and ways of working promote choice, flexibility and accessibility?
- Being clear about the safety of people's personal information and how this will be protected. Seeking consent and being able to articulate clearly what the person is being asked to consent to are ethical principles that social workers must adhere to.[13]

4 Offering choice over methods of communication

- People should be given a choice as to what medium they would like to communicate in and for this to be established at first contact.
- Building relationships is challenging purely online, it is part of the offer **BUT** not the only offer. People must be offered choice and a range of options at each stage.
- Approaches should be tailored based on need. Explicitly naming risk, i.e. where people lack capacity.
- People don't know what they don't know. It is important that information is produced in accessible formats that explain rights and entitlements.
- Self-assessment and self-serve options may be a beneficial option for some people. For others they may not be accessible or appropriate in all circumstances and must be used only where there is genuine benefit for the individual concerned.
- In line with the Equality Act (2010) multiple forms of communication need to be in place to ensure that people aren't being excluded or manipulated. There cannot be a one size fits all approach to digital working.[14] Perpetrators of domestic abuse may use coercive control to manipulate or restrict access to technology.
- Ensure communication is two way – sending someone a message or an email does not mean it has been picked up, understood or responded to. It is crucial to 'check out' that a message has been both received and understood.
- Easy read materials including understanding and promotion of informed consent in the collation and storage of digital records.

5 Exercise professional curiosity

- There is a big push to go digital to solve problems. Advocate for approaches to problem solving that include the voices and experiences of those in need of social work support.
- The rationale for using digital systems should be clear and transparent with evidence provided about the benefits for those in need of support.[15] If this information is not available, then this should be challenged utilising the BASW Code of Ethics.[16]
- Advocate for transparency in ways of working and in decision making. Ensure that choice and different options are available to ensure people are not excluded from accessing support.
- Utilising the BASW Code of Ethics in relation to digital working and learning from the Covid-19 pandemic.[17] Guard again initiatives which are about efficiencies such as streamlining waiting lists and managing demand over approaches that enable and support good relationship-based practice.
- Recognising that the needs of people and families may be different depending on the stage of the journey. This is where relationships are key to checking in and enabling honest and open dialogue.
- Include this important topic in staff training, team meetings and away days and continually consider and evaluate the benefits and challenges of digital transformation.

6 Developing digital capabilities and digital literacy

- Digital capability needs to be central at each stage of a social workers career.[18] There is some recognition of this within the Professional Capabilities Framework and regulatory Professional Standards.[19] It is argued that the existing frameworks across education and social work practice are limited in terms of equipping social workers in the digital age.[20]

- Developing skills and knowledge in the use of digital systems and technology underpinned by the values and ethics of the profession is key to the promotion of wellbeing, inclusion and safeguarding against risk.[21]

- Social workers need to be alert to unregulated and uncontrolled solutions being promoted for use such as the introduction of AI systems to replace administrative functions. A level of knowledge and digital literacy is required to raise questions and to be able to critically evaluate digital approaches and solutions, challenging from a social justice perspective where this undermines relationship based social work.

7   Accountability to citizens – relationship based practice beyond the individual and system

- Balancing local knowledge with centralised systems, being visible and present at a geographical and community level rather than behind a screen. Leadership recognises the value of connecting with people and communities.

- Better use of digital systems to share data transparently with key partners about outcomes across local populations. This will provide valuable information to evaluate how outcomes are being achieved across local authority areas and can be utilised as a strategic tool to engage and encourage participation.

- Communities and families are often spread across different parts of a geographical area, city or country. With the improving digital landscape, it is becoming easier to bring those support systems together through greater interactivity.

- There are reports of the confidence levels of social workers being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic particularly in relation to connection with local communities.[22]

- Remote and virtual working has implications in the availability of informal support and learning opportunities. The impact on the development of newly qualified social workers is an area that requires greater attention.[23]

- Individuals and communities must be at the heart of service design and delivery with the opportunity to be

not just the subject but the author. Social workers need to advocate for and support joint narratives.

- Each time a decision is made regarding digitising a service or a system, the rationale should be clear and have an evidence base.
- Use of digital systems to enable feedback on quality of practice, whether care and support made a difference to people's lives (outcomes). The option to repeat this annually to inform commissioning and future service planning.
- There is a danger that digital transformation and the development of AI become the focus for strategy and national direction. Social workers need to champion and maintain the focus on relationships and the differences to people's lives that are made when time for direct work is supported.

Possible solutions

- For Employers: Clear policies and practice guidance to be developed in partnership with the profession and people who access social work in relation to the use of AI and digital solutions. Guidance should reinforce where accountability sits within organisations.[24]
- For Employers and Practitioners: make best use of digital solutions that have been developed to capture information about the quality of relationship focussed social work. This includes whether children and

adults feel better off with the provision of care and support. Social workers can encourage feedback to be shared using a range of methods, including digital as a way to address power imbalance in the relationship.

- For Employers and Educators: incorporate digital capability into the social work apprenticeship, to enable this to be learned as part of "on the job training" and therefore not a barrier to entry for future students.

- For Higher Education Institutions providing social work qualifying courses, the regulator and other key stakeholders to commit to a requirement (alongside maths and English) of basic digital competence for entry onto social work programmes.

- For Educators: to build upon basic digital knowledge and skills and to relate to the capabilities specific to social work.[25]

- For Educators: Modules taught on social work courses should all contain references to digital literacy and capability.

- For Professional Association's and the Regulator: The Code of Ethics[26] and Professional Standards to take account of developments in digitalisation and AI. The Code of Ethics is essential to practice, underpinning professional judgments and supporting social workers in raising critical challenge at a local and national level.[27]

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