

Piloting free continuing professional development (CPD) resources to support social workers involved in disasters



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1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY



While disasters are often perceived by those living in the UK as occurring elsewhere in the world, events such as the Manchester Arena Bombing, Grenfell Tower Fire and the Covid-19 Pandemic have driven home the fact that disasters can and do happen in the UK too. The negative impacts of these disasters are more likely to be felt by the communities that social workers are disproportionately involved with. This includes older people, people with disabilities and minority ethnic communities (Cleary and Dominelli, 2020). This is one of the reasons why

social workers have been central to the responses to disasters in the UK, and social workers admirably step up to the challenges they face in responding. However, the overall picture is one of a workforce that is not regularly included in disaster preparation, lacks the confidence to engage in disaster response, and is frequently overwhelmed by the scale of disaster recovery faced (Cleary and Dominelli, 2020). These issues are all exacerbated by the contemporary context of social work in the UK, where resource shortages, poor working conditions, high workloads, and bureaucratic, procedurally driven cultures make disaster preparedness, response and recovery particularly difficult (Harris, 2019; Ravalier et al., 2020; British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2022).

This report presents the findings of a pilot study of a four-module continuous professional development (CPD) training course designed to support social workers in working with disasters. The training was developed to be free-to-access and the modules are hosted by BASW on their website. Six social workers took part in the pilot study, with participants highlighting the value they found in the training, not just for working in disasters, but also in applying the learning to their day to day practice. The fact that the modules were self-directed and could be accessed at any time was described as a particular strength. However, probably the most prominent theme raised by participants was that

they struggled to engage effectively with the modules due to the challenges of contemporary social work practice, in particular the high workloads they experience. This is something that is reflected in research elsewhere, including findings from YouGov (2021) that only 32% of social workers reported getting time off from their employers to undertake CPD.

Following a review of the resources and changes made in response to the findings of this pilot study, the training is now ready to be launched nationally.

2. THE TRAINING MODULES

The training course being piloted stemmed from the initial work of the BASW Disasters Working Group, involving academics, social workers, government representatives and people with lived experience. The group worked to highlight the unique contribution of social work to disaster preparedness, response and recovery. More information on the ongoing work of that group can be found [here](#).

One of the major contributions of that working group was the development of CPD guidance on the role of social workers during disasters, building on the existing research and experiences in this area, and drawing on learning from a number of conferences and other engagement events. More details on the launch of this guidance can be found [here](#).

Following the launch of the guidance, BASW funded a systematic literature review of social work in disasters, completed by the University of Stirling. That systematic review painted a picture of “a tremendous wealth of research”, identifying 325 relevant peer-reviewed sources and books that were included in the analysis (Cleary and Dominelli, 2020: 2). It also included a specific section mapping the findings to the CPD guidance, supporting integration into any training materials. This full literature review can be viewed [here](#).

Building on this extensive knowledge, experience and evidence, the Open University funded the development of this training course, supported and hosted by BASW on their website. The training course was designed with the English context in mind, in particular when referring to legislation and policy. However, it is hoped that social workers throughout the UK and internationally will also find value in the modules.

The training materials were the outcome of group work that included a diversity of expertise in social work, education and online instruction design. The development went through various

stages, including identifying learning building blocks, outlining learning objectives, selecting formats, media and storyboards, and scripting the flow of information across the resources. At each stage of developing the training experts from each field revised the materials and gave feedback according to each expertise.



The course is structured around four modules, each mapped to the CPD guidance and drawing extensively on the literature review conducted by the University of Stirling team (Cleary and Dominelli, 2020):

Module 1:
Introduction to Social Work in Disasters

Module 2:
Law, policy, and best practice

Module 3:
Person centred and research informed practice within a multi-agency approach

Module 4:
Responding, using theory and self-care

Each module starts with preparation reading, followed by asynchronous (self-directed) content that participants work through themselves. The training makes use of text, video and audio content alongside individual tasks that are completed in a separate workbook provided. The modules all end with suggestions for further reading, and a

follow-up task to complete to imbed the learning and encourage wider engagement. The suggested length for each module is four hours, or 16 hours total. This equates to approximately two full days to complete the course in its entirety.

While the modules are designed to be self-directed by individual social workers, participants are encouraged throughout to engage with their colleagues, in particular in the follow-up tasks. For example, following Module 1 participants are asked to use the resources and contacts available to them to find out if there is a plan in place at their organisation in case of a disaster, and to engage with those with responsibility for such a plan. The modules are also designed so they can be engaged with by two or more social workers supporting each other. Two of the participants in this pilot took this approach and were very positive about the mutual support they provided each other, in particular in light of the workplace pressures they also described.



3. METHODOLOGY

This pilot was led by the principles of democratic evaluation, which cautions against limiting evaluation to predetermined outcome targets, instead encouraging engagement with the broader impact of public programmes (Kushner, 2017). Democratic evaluation is particularly pertinent to new programmes and initiatives, where determinations of merit can be contested, or ideologically and politically driven (Hanley, 2022). This approach opened the evaluation up to explore areas like employer support and working conditions as they relate to the training, contexts that were found to be particularly influential in how the modules were engaged with by participants. A full exploration of the application of democratic evaluation, alongside a more expansive exploration of the methodology and findings are planned to be provided in a more in-depth upcoming journal publication.

Social workers were recruited for the pilot through the contacts of the BASW Disasters Working Group and social workers were asked to put themselves forward voluntarily to take part. A total of six social workers from a range of backgrounds and workplaces were recruited in this way. Participants were also asked about their experience of working during disasters. All six had worked as a social worker during the Covid-19 pandemic, and other experience described included working with Ukrainian refugees and working after the Grenfell tower fire.



Participants were all given ten weeks to complete the four modules, and following this, were contacted to take part in semi-structured interviews. All interviews were undertaken remotely to minimise impacts/risks related to travel, Covid-19, and the participant's time. The interviews were then transcribed removing all identifying information, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). NVivo 12 Professional software was used to support this qualitative data analysis. Ethical approval was received from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

4. FINDINGS

This section summarises the key themes stemming from the analysis of the interviews with participants. This is structured around three sections: training modules, educational perspectives and professional perspectives.

4.1 Training Modules

The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the modules they completed. This included positive comments about the preparation reading, the module content, the workbook, and the follow-up tasks.

The questions were structured brilliantly, and I was able to go from A to B to C to D. The information that I could read up about a situation was very helpful while I was answering the questions and thinking about it (Participant 1).

The content is really good as in you've got written work, you've got videos. So, I like that aspect because it's not just reading and reading and reading and reading (Participant 4).

Several of the participants compared the modules to their usual experience of CPD opportunities:

I think as well there is a real culture around training where we are either sort of passive listeners and then we're asked to complete a sort of satisfaction questionnaire at the end and then you get sent training materials and you might skim it and save it in a folder, but that's about it really. Or all these online training courses

where you just go through and click the right answers through, you know the multiple choice answers... This one requires me to reflect a bit more and it's a bit more research (Participant 5).

The training approach was also contrasted with the lack of training in responding to disasters they had experienced previously, in particular, the Covid-19 pandemic:

We had sessions and training around our own well-being and resilience but as far as I can remember, we did not have anything that was sort of specifically this is how this might affect your interactions with clients, and this is how you can kind of overcome some of these difficulties (Participant 3).

There was also some critique of the training, including at different points that the content was either "a bit heavy going" or "really academic", and alternatively that it was "quite basic" or "not very challenging". At times these comments were made by the same participants about different sections of the modules, and it is possible they relate to specific areas of practice or theory that the participants were more familiar with. Furthermore, it can be seen from the way some participants described their journey through the modules that they often overcame these initial challenges:

I think looking at the workbook, I thought oh my God really do I need to do all of this and so I put it aside. You know you hope for that time when you think, right, I can concentrate. But it never comes. Which is why I decided I'm just going to go with it. But the more I look at the workbook, the more I realise actually it's quite nice, which is why I said the flow is quite nice is that it's nice manageable chunks [Participant 5].

I think I've got a much clearer picture now of how assessment skills in a kind of day-to-day context can then be applied to disasters and I think probably that was the bit of the training that I found most useful for kind of applying it to my own sort of day-to-day experience in work [Participant 3].

Rather than sitting listening to an event or oh reading papers, it is actually translating that information into your daily practices. It's really helpful to have to apply it [Participant 6].

Some more specific feedback about certain features and sections of the training modules was acted upon, including changing some tasks to make them clearer and making some of the reading materials more accessible. There were also some minor technical issues that were highlighted and improved upon, in particular, in relation to ease of access. Some other comments, around making the modules content easier to engage with via smartphones or the development of a specified application were not acted upon due to a lack of funding or resources. However, these are potential areas for development and improvement in the future.

4.2 Educational Perspectives

This section explores the educational perspectives that participants highlighted, under the themes of situational learning, group learning and time management.

4.2.1 Situational Learning

A theme that participants all highlighted was situational learning, or the ways that the meaning they derived from the learning they were engaged was relevant to and drew upon the real activities of practice and daily living:

4.2.2 Group Learning

Despite the training modules being designed to be self-directed, the resources encouraged learners to learn from others, communicate and collaborate. Participants highlighted the role of the follow-up tasks in promoting this, including the task of finding out about their workplace's disaster response plan, which led to some ongoing collaborations:

And so I got a quick response which was fantastic and they said, would you like to be one of the responders? So I said, oh yes, please, that would be, we need people like you so we've been hooked into the response unit [Participant 6].

Participants also described speaking to colleagues in their teams about the training, and the interest that was expressed by others:

It was only a very brief chat about it and yeah my colleagues were interested in it (Participant 3).

So from the people that I work with and were like Oh my God that sounds so interesting (Participant 4).

Two participants even described presenting on their learning on disasters to their teams, and that this was received positively. The two participants from the same team who described completing the training together were also very positive about the experience, noting that they would arrange to meet and discuss their progress collaboratively.

4.2.3 Time Management

Five of the six participants agreed that the suggested four hours per module was about right. The other participant described that they spent about 40 hours total across the four modules, although they described that the longer time they spent was related to the particular interest they have in the topic and reading up more on the content:

I spent a lot of time on it, more over and above the allocated time, and a lot of it was because I enjoyed it (Participant 1).

The suggested time for individual tasks were described as helpful by participants for keeping them on track with the timing. No participants described completing the modules entirely during paid work time, and half described not using any paid work time. More commonly the training was described as being engaged with during days off, lunch breaks, evenings, weekends and during annual leave.

Only one of the participants managed to complete all four modules within the ten weeks they were originally allocated, and that was the same participant who stated that the training course took them about 40 hours total. They also were a participant who did the training course entirely within their own time rather than during work time. One additional participant had completed all the modules by the time the interview was undertaken. The four other participants had completed either one or two modules only, although some had done some of the preparation reading or workbook tasks from later modules as well. For the participants who had not completed all four modules, they all expressed a desire to complete them when they have the time. The difficulties experienced by participants in relation to completing the training are explored more below.

4.3 Professional Perspectives

This section explores the professional perspectives that participants highlighted under the themes of interest and engagement, self-confidence, innovation and new ideas, knowledge refresher and employer support.

4.3.1 Interest and Engagement

Something that was raised by all participants was that they were motivated to engage with this pilot through their interest in the area of social work in disasters:

So I thought I'd want to devote time for this because I want to learn it and I want to understand it better (Participant 1).

I think there's so many areas that I'm interested in. Obviously, you know this course that's been designed is one of them (Participant 4).

It is likely that this interest was part of what encouraged some participants to take part in the pilot in the first place. However, it is also noteworthy that, as described above, when participants raised the training course in discussions with colleagues they also found broader interest in their teams.

4.3.2 Self-Confidence

Participants described the self-confidence they gained from completing this training and related this to how it could have impacted on previous experiences of working with disasters:

I think if I went back and did it again, I'd kind of kept that in mind a lot more and thought, probably thought more carefully about the actual impact of the kind of intervention of the visits and the contact itself (Participant 3).

I think I would have had different conversations. Yeah, instead of what I did was [that] I walked out of the job (Participant 5).

Participants also described their increased confidence for potentially responding to future disasters:

I feel more comfortable with it. I don't think I'm still fully 100% there, but I have a good, good, good understanding of it now as to what my role and our role would be and also perhaps what it isn't (Participant 1).

This confidence was present even for those who did not complete all four modules, suggesting that it did not take the entire course to instil a sense of self-confidence.

4.3.3 Innovation and New Ideas

Participants all described the new ideas that they were introduced to through the training course, including in relation to practice and political contexts:

A lot of things I'd not even thought about. So it kind of triggered my brain which you know sometimes is dormant (Participant 2).

Think about the wider context and the political context... I was quite naive in approaching it, but it was really helpful to trigger my thinking and think about the much wider issues (Participant 6).

Participants also described the encouragement to innovate and think "outside the box" when responding to disasters. They contrasted this with the statutory contexts that most worked in, which alongside restricting their engagement with this training, were also described as restricting how they can respond to disasters:

It felt like all of those things about kind of preparation and community development and all of that, it felt like it was quite alien to a statutory setting (Participant 3).

Managers, I wouldn't say it's a question. I mean, one of them directly said, well, what you doing that for? She was just like well, why would you need that? Well, what happens if we have a terrorist attack or we have a flood or you know, something like? Don't you think we need to be a bit more aware of the impact? Well, we'll just wing it like we do everything (Participant 4).

4.3.4 Knowledge Refresher

Alongside innovation and new ideas, another theme was that the training provided a refresher, or a reminder of what participants felt they already knew. This included in relation social work values and ethics, and knowledge and skills:

The CPD course really made me think about attachment and strength-based working and resilience and systems (Participant 1).

It was really refreshing to do the training and kind of be reminded these are what our ethics and values are and this is how we can respond (Participant 3).

It is noteworthy that the two participants who worked in non-statutory contexts when completing this training course were much more positive about the potential to apply their learning to practice, although they also highlighted high workloads and a lack of time as challenges.

4.3.5 Employer Support

Probably the most prominent theme in all of interviews did not relate to the training modules themselves, but the context of contemporary social work practice. As has been alluded to in previous sections, despite participants volunteering to take part in this pilot study and agreeing to the time commitment, all six struggled to engage with the modules due to the pressures of their roles. For all but one, this meant they were unable to complete the training over the course of the ten weeks they were allotted. Participants described that this was not for a lack of trying:

I did try it, to start to read it, in my lunch hour and it just wasn't working and I think that's because I just don't switch off during my lunch hour (Participant 1).

I took it on holiday with me. I will say I did not look at it, but I did take it on holiday when I went the other week because I thought I might have a few mornings when the kids are still asleep, and I can have a little go. And once again I did other work (Participant 2).

I would try and set aside time in the evening and then you end up, because it would be on my work computer, I think that's fatal because you open your laptop in the evening or the weekend and you see oh I'll just have a look at this e-mail and how many emails have come through (Participant 6).

Participants described variable levels of support from their managers in relation to undertaking the training, with some describing their managers had negative attitudes towards the training:

Then the other manager that I kind of spoke to about it and said, you know, it's really interesting, said I don't understand the link between that and social work. So you know, sometimes I just get, I get to the point where I'm like do you know what? I can't even be arsed trying to educate you. Just going to let you go off in your little bubble (Participant 4).

However, others were more positive about the approach taken by their managers:

My manager... she's aware that I'm doing it. And absolutely I think she would support you with this, anything work related they would support you to do, anything to support you to do professional development (Participant 6).

Notably though, even in these cases this support did not translate into practical support of the participants, all of whom described significant challenges with workloads and time constraints.

Two participants even suggested that doing the training course during work time instead of their own time would reflect badly on them, raising questions about how CPD is perceived within their workplaces. For one of these participants undertaking this training was included as a goal in their annual appraisal, and still they felt they should be completing it in their own time:

I consider my work life really, my 30 hours a week is to work for my employer and this I see very much as a personal growth and development (Participant 1).

It's almost frowned on if you say, well, that you know it's their protected time for training. It's a culture. It's a culture within social work (Participant 5).

Two participants described changing jobs between agreeing to be part of the pilot and their research interviews. Both highlighted that this was not something they were planning when they agreed to be part of the pilot, and that their transitions to new roles had impacted on their ability to successfully complete the full training course. With large numbers of social workers moving roles every year, and even greater numbers describing their desire to do so, this is a challenge that the national launch of this training course is likely to come up against and needs to be recognised (Ravalier et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2022).

As a final point in relation to the theme of employer support, it was significant that participants described that the pressures they were experiencing were not something that was temporary or getting better. Instead the situation was described as rapidly deteriorating:

We used to go in what we call peaks and troughs, but we don't seem to get many troughs (Participant 2).

There was a couple of rumblings people weren't happy, all of a sudden, you're on this downward nosedive and the only person that's going to be able to keep it lifted is kind of yourself really, but then you just think, oh, God, the amount of work I'm already drowned in (Participant 4).

But the reality is that on the frontline, it's really hard to recruit social workers and [organisation redacted] really wasn't impacted by that for many years. I joined seven years ago and it was amazing because the local authority that I came from before did have recruitment challenges and we seemed to be in a bubble and not be affected by that. But actually we now are. Which just reflects the national situation (Participant 6).

5. LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations with this research that need to be acknowledged. The participants were asked to volunteer for the research, meaning that the sample was self-selecting. This suggests that participants were likely already interested in this area before undertaking the training. The sample was also not representative of the social work profession, with all participants being female for example, compared to 82.6% of social workers who are female (Social Work England, 2022). Furthermore, the data collection was carried out by the lead researcher, who was also involved in the BASW Disasters Working Group and in designing the materials. Therefore participants may have been inclined to be less critical of them during the interviews.



6. CONCLUSION

This report has presented the findings of a pilot study of a four-module training course for social workers working with disasters. This was backed up by a systematic literature review (Cleary and Dominelli, 2020) and the ongoing work of the BASW Disasters Working Group. Overall, the findings suggest that the self-directed model of training was seen as positive by participants. There were positives from an educational perspective related to situational learning and group learning and from a professional perspective including in relation to self-confidence, innovation and new ideas, and refreshing previous knowledge. There were also challenges, including around technology and module content. Some of these have been addressed, and others can be looked at in future if more funding or resources become available, including the potential to create better smartphone integration.

A major theme in all interviews was the difficulty that participants had in engaging with the training in the context of contemporary social work practice in England, described as being dominated by high workloads, long hours, and bureaucratic, procedurally driven cultures. The link between these factors and social workers struggling to engage effectively with CPD has also been recognised in research and literature elsewhere (Gordon *et al.*, 2019; Cordis Bright, 2019; YouGov, 2021; Reddington *et al.*, 2021; Johnson *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it seems unlikely that this training will be able to fully realise its intended impact of supporting social workers to be better prepared to respond to disasters until these wider workforce issues are effectively addressed. In order to encourage employer support and buy-in, a short letter for employers outlining the key benefits of the training and it aligns to the Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW, 2018) has been developed.

Notably though even those participants who didn't complete all four modules described the benefits of the training, including that their self-confidence in this



area had improved. The potential for the modules to be used to rapidly upskill social workers who are required to respond to a specific disaster context may also be less impacted by the challenges described by participants, being that at that time disaster response will be an immediate and high priority. Therefore, even in the face of the workforce challenges described, there remains value in launching and promoting the training course, in particular as it will remain free and flexibly available to anyone who sees value in it.

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