



# **Beyond the pandemic: Re-visiting professional ethical wisdom in social work**

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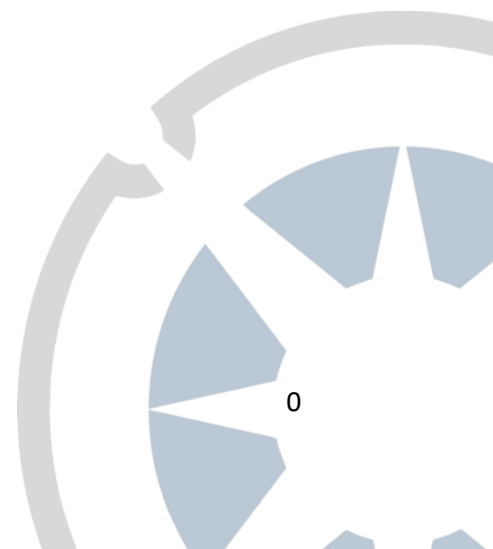
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# Beyond the pandemic: Re-visiting professional ethical wisdom in social work

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## Introduction

This paper explores the concept and practice of professional ethical wisdom in the field of social work in the face of new challenges, not necessarily covered by existing rules/procedures. Such challenges were experienced at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, and may occur during other types of emergency or crisis, when professionals use their own judgement more than in 'normal' circumstances. This may be experienced as an unwanted and unfamiliar burden, or a liberation from unnecessary bureaucracy. What does it mean to exercise professional ethical wisdom in such circumstances? Is professional ethical wisdom a useful concept and practice? How does it relate to recent understandings of *phronesis* by the Jubilee Centre? How can we nurture it in social professionals?

This paper considers these questions in relation to social work, a profession that operates in statutory and voluntary sector contexts to assess, support, empower, safeguard or constrain people in need of social care, mental health services or family support, or regarded as at risk or dangerous, for example. The paper draws on empirical research on social workers' ethical challenges, conducted during 2020-22, details of which will be outlined later. The quotations from social workers at the start of the next section, designed to set the scene, are taken from this research.

## Background

The outbreak of Covid-19 has placed a lot of responsibility on individual social workers to make decisions that may have serious consequences ... (Child and Family Social Worker, UK).

There was no real specialist guidance in terms of what do we do when we're going and seeing a disabled child. It was all very generic ... we were absolutely scared to death that we were going to kill one of our own children [children supported by disability services] just by virtue of visiting them (Children's Disability Strategic Manager, UK).

It takes more energy to be vigilant about confidentiality, not making the thoughtless or snarky remark, and to focus on all the implications of every choice ... (Special Needs Coordinator, UK).

Social workers working during periods of restrictions imposed during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 faced both: 1) situations in which existing legal obligations, procedures and ways of working could not be applied or were waived; and 2) situations in which new, hastily imposed laws, policies and procedures were supposed to be applied. Examples affecting UK social work include: 1) relaxing of requirements to assess people's circumstances and needs prior to changing their care arrangements; and 2) restrictions on residents in care homes being allowed to go outdoors (see British Association of Social Workers, 2020; Baginsky et al., 2022). This over-turning of usual expectations and routines caused confusion and distress amongst professionals, but also creativity and learning. It is the latter two responses in which I am interested here.

In a paper for the September 2022 Jubilee Centre Conference (Banks, 2022), I argued that pandemic conditions created more space than usual for the exercise of virtues. For the vacuums left by the inapplicability of usual rules and routines in some cases, and the gross harms and inequities caused to individuals by blanket rules in others, motivated social workers deliberately to exercise their moral agency in spheres where such conscious effort would not usually be required. Examples of the exercise of courage (e.g. making home visits in spite of health risks), care (e.g. arranging food distribution on the streets) and justice (e.g. challenging local authority rules limiting outdoor exercise in residential homes) were legion during the restrictions caused by the pandemic (see Banks 2022).

In this paper I will focus on the meta-virtue of what I call 'professional ethical wisdom'. This draws on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1954), elaborated upon in a professional context. For neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, particularly those linked with the Jubilee Centre, *phronesis* has several crucial functions. These include balancing the other virtues (e.g. working out how to be courageous in challenging someone, whilst also being respectful), as well as identifying morally salient features of situations (seeing a harm or infringement of rights), emotional regulation (infusing emotion with reason) and maintaining the integrity and moral identity of the moral agent in relation to their vision of human [and planetary] flourishing (Kristjánsson et al., 2021). While this intellectual meta-virtue of 'discernment, deliberation and arbitration' (Kristjánsson and Fowers, 2022, p. 1) is critical in everyday life for citizens and professionals, arguably it is even more so in times of crisis, when people and professionals face new and difficult choices as dilemmas rise to the surface and erupt. The 'ethical space' becomes wider and deeper. By 'ethical space' I mean room for deliberations and reflections on attitudes, behaviours, choices, decisions, roles and relationships with implications for harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities. This space is wider in that ethical issues arise in more situations, and it is deeper in that fundamental questions about what matters in life are raised and brought to the surface. At least, this is the case for those people who have the energy and cognitive and emotional bandwidth to see the ethical space and place themselves in it. For some social workers the challenges were too demanding, especially if they and their families were sick or vulnerable or if the relentless urgency of meeting needs was too great (see Peinado and Anderson, 2020). However, for many the ethical space presented itself and could not be ignored.

### **Revisiting professional ethical wisdom in social work**

I introduced the concept of professional ethical wisdom in a paper for the Jubilee Centre conference in 2017 (Banks, 2017). This was subsequently developed as a book chapter in which professional ethical wisdom is described as:

the disposition to engage in judicious practical deliberation in workplace situations in which matters of harm, benefit, rights and responsibilities are at stake. This entails sensitivity to ethically salient features of situations; empathy with the feelings, values, desires and perspectives of others; the capacity to exercise moral imagination; and good judgement regarding the right course of action in the light of defensible reasons (Banks, 2018, p. 55).

I made arguments for why I had qualified ‘wisdom’ with ‘professional’ and ‘ethical’, rather than simply using the Aristotelian term ‘phronesis’ or its common English translation ‘practical wisdom’. In brief, the term ‘professional wisdom’ is sometimes used in the professional ethics literature to refer to phronesis in a professional context (Bondi et al, 2011). This is a signal that, whilst drawing on the Aristotelian concept, it is modified and elaborated upon to be relevant to twenty-first century professional life. While ‘professional wisdom’ is often used loosely and imprecisely, so too is ‘phronesis’, as Kristjánsson et al. (2021, p. 241) point out. This is not necessarily an argument for not using the term, but rather for being clear about what is meant by it. I added the adjective ‘ethical’ to emphasise that the focus is on professional wisdom in the ethical domain. This is, of course, already understood in the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, but its common English translation of ‘practical wisdom’ may have ordinary language connotations linked with doing ‘hands-on’ or ‘technical’ tasks. Hence ‘ethical’ clearly signals the focus on matters relating to deliberations about harms, responsibilities, flourishing, and so on.

In the conference paper and subsequent book chapter (Banks, 2017; 2018) I elaborated on professional ethical wisdom in social work as the capacity to do ‘ethics work’. The focus of ethics work is the effort made by social workers to practice ethically and be ethical. It is important to note that ethics work is not premised on the moral realism attributed to Aristotle and espoused by many neo-Aristotelian philosophers. It draws more on social constructionist approaches of sociologists and social work theorists with an interest in how people make and re-make their moral selves and give accounts of themselves and their actions (Gergen, 2011; Witkin, 2017). While these fundamental differences in moral ontology and epistemology influence the extent to which we can meaningfully compare the neo-Aristotelian phronesis model and the professional ethical wisdom framework, nevertheless, at the practical level of what practitioners are thinking and doing, there may be mutually beneficial insights to be gained. Hence I proceed on that basis, without venturing further into debates about different versions of moral realism and social constructionism and whether they are, in fact, compatible or complementary (Bøe, 2021).

I analysed ethics work in terms of seven dimensions, summarised below (for more details see Banks, 2016):

1. **Framing work** – identifying and focusing on the ethically salient features of a situation; placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts; negotiating/co-constructing frames with others (including service users and colleagues).
2. **Role work** – playing a role in relation to others (advocate, carer, critic); taking a position (partial/impartial; close/distant); negotiating roles; responding to role expectations.
3. **Emotion work** – being caring, compassionate and empathic; managing emotions; building trust; responding to emotions of others.

4. **Identity work** – working on one’s ethical self; creating an identity as an ethically good professional; negotiating professional identity; maintaining professional integrity.
5. **Reason work** – making and justifying moral judgements and decisions; deliberation with others on ethical evaluations and tactics; working out strategies for ethical action.
6. **Relationship work** – engaging in dialogue with others; working on relationships through emotion, identity and reason work (dialogue work)
7. **Performance work** – making visible aspects of this work to others; demonstrating oneself at work (accountability work).

As will be explained in the next section, the origins of ‘ethics work’ do not lie in an attempt to develop a model of phronesis in professional life as such. Rather the concept arose from analyses of social workers’ accounts of how they understood and tackled ethical issues in practice. However, the elaboration of the framework was informed by insights from work on phronesis, especially since ethics work seemed to perform many of the functions attributed to phronesis. But the concept of ethics work was developed prior to the more detailed work of the Jubilee Centre on phronesis.

Since 2017, phronesis (including phronesis in professional life) has been the focus of much attention, both in studies by the Jubilee Centre and beyond. The work of the Jubilee Centre has involved the development of a four-component model of neo-Aristotelian phronesis designed to function as a measurable construct with a view to empirically testing the relationship between phronesis and pro-social behaviour, demonstrating the role of phronesis in bridging the gap between moral knowledge and action, and developing educational programmes to cultivate phronesis in young people and professionals (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson et al., 2020). It has also involved a spirited defence of phronesis against challenges from philosophy (Miller, 2021) and psychology (Lapsley, 2021) that the concept of phronesis is redundant as its functions can be performed by the individual virtues or recently developed psychological constructs. These critiques suggest that phronesis is simply an umbrella term for a combination of different functions. Kristjánsson et al’s (2022) defence, based on an analogy between phronesis and a decathlon, is imaginative and compelling. They argue that the different components of phronesis are inter-related, just like the different sports that comprise a decathlon. Excelling at each individual sport that forms part of a decathlon does not lead to success as a decathlete. The key is to balance the speed or strength needed for some sports with the endurance or flexibility needed for others, for example. Similarly, in the case of the moral virtues, courage or justice may need to be balanced with care or respect, and this requires an overarching unifying, integrative and adjudicating function.

In professional life, the concept of phronesis or professional ethical wisdom as an overarching quality or characteristic that the professional can cultivate and identify with is, arguably, important. Yet while phronesis should not just be regarded as an umbrella term in

the sense of simply referring to a combination of psychological functions, it is nevertheless a complex and contested concept.

### Professional ethical wisdom – from the ground up

While Kristjánsson et al. have developed their four-component model by starting with Aristotle’s concept of phronesis and developing it as an empirically measurable construct relevant to the field of moral psychology, my route to the concept of professional ethical wisdom has a different starting point. This lies in social welfare professionals’ narrative accounts of their practice, and tends to engage with a different disciplinary audience (a more sociologically-oriented professional ethics).

The concept of professional ethical wisdom emerged from several decades of empirical research studies and projects involving analysis of interviews, focus groups, dialogues and written cases from social workers and social work students about the ethical challenges faced in practice (see Banks, 2004; Banks and Nøhr, 2012). From these data, the idea of ‘ethics work’ was developed to encapsulate the efforts social workers described themselves as making to practise ethically and be ethical practitioners, as presented in their own post-hoc accounts of their practice.

While different in many ways (not least in its more social constructionist approach to understanding professional life), several features of ethics work can (with some stretching) be mapped onto the four components of the Jubilee Centre model of phronesis, as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Mapping features of neo-Aristotelian phronesis against professional ethical wisdom**

Neo-Aristotelian phronesis model, 4 functions (Kristjánsson et al., 2021, pp. 246-7)	Professional ethical wisdom, 7 elements of ethics work (Banks, 2016; 2018)
<b>Constitutive</b> – cognitive ability to perceive ethically salient features of a situation and appreciate these as calling for specific kinds of response. ‘Moral sensitivity’.	<b>Framing</b> - identifying and focusing on the ethically salient features of a situation; placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts.
<b>Integrative</b> – integrating different components of a good life, especially where different kinds of virtues or values appear to be in conflict, enabling adjudication of moral matters.	<b>Reasoning</b> - making and justifying moral judgements and decisions; deliberation with others on ethical evaluations and tactics; working out strategies for ethical action.
<b>Blueprint</b> – the agents’ overall understanding of the kinds of things that matter for a flourishing life: the agent’s own ethical identity, aims and aspirations.	<b>Identity</b> - working on one’s ethical self; creating an identity as an ethically good professional; negotiating professional identity; maintaining professional integrity.

<p><b>Emotional regulation</b> – agents bringing emotional responses into line with their understandings of ethically salient aspects of their situation, their judgment and recognition of what is at stake in the moment. Infusing emotion with reason.</p>	<p><b>Emotion</b> - being caring, compassionate and empathic; managing emotions; building trust; responding to emotions of others.</p>
	<p><b>Role</b> - playing a role in relation to others (advocate, carer, critic); taking a position (partial/impartial; close/distant); negotiating roles.</p>
	<p><b>Relationship</b> - engaging in dialogue with others; working on relationships through emotion, identity and reason work.</p>
	<p><b>Performance</b> - making visible aspects of this work to others; demonstrating oneself at work.</p>

Considering the four components/elements that are mapped against each other in Table 1, there are marked overlaps (especially between the constitutive function of phronesis and framing work), but also some different emphases. The integrative function of phronesis highlights its role in bringing together elements of the good life and adjudicating between conflicting virtues. This locates phronesis very explicitly in a virtue ethics framework and suggests ways to broaden the characterisation of reason work. Similarly, the blueprint function, while encompassing professional ethical identity, goes beyond this to what matters for a flourishing life. This leaves open the possibility of questioning the role of the profession and its core values from an outside vantage point – avoiding the charge of relativism often made against those who see professions as internally consistent practices, drawing on MacIntyre’s (1985) concept of a practice with its own internal goods.

Those features of ethics work not specifically identifiable in the Jubilee Centre model are ‘role work’, ‘relationship work’ and ‘performance work’. To some extent these may be regarded as particularly related to professional contexts. In professional life, being clear about the responsibilities and boundaries of the professional role is important, as is the choice of sub-roles, such as advocate for service users’ needs or controller of dangerous people. Similarly, there is a focus, especially in social work, on the nature of the relationship between professionals and service users – building trust, being caring and preserving confidentiality, for example. The final element of ethics work is described as ‘performance work’ – demonstrating oneself as doing ethics work, as being a good professional. It could be argued that this is built into each of the other components, but in professional life it is important to be seen as a credible professional, with professional integrity – so making visible one’s efforts in this regard can be significant. Hence professional ethical wisdom, as its name implies, is less generic than neo-Aristotelian phronesis and has more professional context-specific elements built into it.

Having outlined elements of what I understand by professional ethical wisdom and its relationship to the neo-Aristotelian phronesis model, I will now move to consider professional ethical wisdom in relation to ethical challenges faced by social workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Social workers practising during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The discussion that follows draws on two research studies that were conducted by members of the Social Work Ethics Research Group in partnership with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) during 2020-2022. The first, in May 2020, comprised an online qualitative survey asking social workers for details of ethical challenges faced in working during the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic. This drew over 600 responses from around the world, which included examples of specific ethically challenging situations or incidents (see Banks, Cai, et al., 2020a; 2020b for details of methodology and findings). Four follow-up interviews with British social workers were conducted in December 2020, which provided detailed reflections on practice during the past eight months. During April-May 2022, a series of six webinars was conducted in different regions of the world (see Banks and Cairns, et al., 2022 for methodology and findings). The aim was to review the ethical implications and learning from working under the shadow of the pandemic during the past two years, and to look beyond the pandemic and reflect on the role of social work in other types of crises, including the climate crisis.

The qualitative survey and online webinars were advertised via IFSW and national social work association networks and were open to all who wished to respond/attend. Hence those who participated would tend to be social workers with whom the idea of 'ethical challenges' resonated, who wished to articulate and share their experiences and who were, perhaps, reasonably competent in ethical reflection. Nevertheless, what is striking in the responses of many participants is the degree of ethical awareness, including the ability to perceive ethically salient features of a situation, and the efforts made to practise ethically in very difficult circumstances.

In the next section, I draw particularly on data from the 41 UK responses to the survey and four follow-up interviews, as they can be understood against the same contextual background of legislation, policy guidance and practice expectations (for details of the UK situation, see Banks and Rutter, 2021; Rutter, Banks and Shears, 2021). I consider first situations in which there was a vacuum of rules and guidance, and secondly situations where new blanket rules were challenged.

#### **1. New circumstances: work cannot carry on as usual, but no specific guidance given**

When national governments introduced restrictions on the movement and in-person contact of citizens, many workplaces closed, and services were stopped. In the UK emergency legislation was introduced (Coronavirus Act, 2020), which waived some statutory social work duties such as assessing people's needs prior to hospital discharge, for example. In the early weeks of the pandemic, social work organisations, work teams and individual social workers were 'making it up' as they went along, as official guidance from government departments was slow to emerge.



Many statutory duties of social workers could not stop – for example, responding to reports of child abuse, assessing people for emergency admission to psychiatric hospital, carrying out ‘best interests’ assessments – but they had to be done differently. This not only caused a rethinking of the logistics of conducting a safe assessment, but also created ethical challenges in preserving privacy online and dilemmas relating to minimising the risk of catching or spreading the virus versus respecting someone’s right to a fair assessment. I will elaborate on some of the ethical challenges faced and responses made by offering an example given by a social worker who participated in the research study in 2020.

***Example: Working out how to practise ethically in relation to Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards***

The survey response and subsequent in-depth interview with a social worker practising as a Mental Capacity Act and Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards Manager illustrates some of the ‘ethics work’ undertaken by him and his team of five best interest assessors. The Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) under the Mental Capacity Act (MCA, 2005) permit restraint and restrictions to be used in hospitals and care homes – but only if they are in a person’s best interests. Social workers undertake these ‘best interests’ assessments.

According to the manager (in the interview he gave in December 2020), in the early weeks after the emergency legislation was introduced ‘there was lots of guidance coming out about all sorts of things, but there wasn’t any guidance coming out about the Mental Capacity Act or about DoLS’. This meant that the MCA was still in force, and social workers had to do the required assessments. He described ‘trying to deal with not being able to see people face-to-face .... that was the single biggest, biggest challenge that we had’. Talking about conducting remote assessments, he commented: ‘we did it pragmatically’. His team realised that if they were doing assessments remotely, they needed to put some wording in the assessments to say what they had done: ‘we need to justify ... we need to give a reason why we’ve not gone to see the person’. He developed a form of words and shared it nationally. Reflecting on doing the work in these circumstances he said:

We just had to do it. Because we could see the need. We couldn’t, we couldn’t just stop. But we had to try and work out: How do we describe what we’re doing? How do we justify what we’re doing? And explain that this is as close as we can get to how we’d ideally like to do this work?

In the survey, this manager gave an example of an ethically challenging situation involving a Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards assessment of a young man living in residential care who had diagnoses of learning disabilities and hearing impairment. The care home staff were concerned that he did not have the mental capacity to understand the Covid-19 restrictions. The manager planned the remote assessment meticulously, choosing a male assessor who had expertise in mental health issues and was ‘the most technologically savvy member of the team’. This was a social worker whom the manager thought might be able to develop a good understanding and rapport with the young man and would be capable of getting the technology to work. The manager also spoke to the local authority’s sensory team to find out more about the young man, discovering that he did not always want to identify as deaf,

but could communicate via a British Sign Language interpreter. A successful online meeting then took place with a BSL interpreter, which resulted in the assessor judging that the young man did have the capacity to understand the Covid-19 restrictions, even though he was unwilling to comply with them. Therefore, he should not have his freedoms restricted through a DoLS authorisation.

In this and many other cases, the DoLS manager and his team had to work out how to proceed as fairly as possible without in-person assessment meetings, trying to ensure the rights of the service users were respected and social workers were accountable for their decisions. This involved framing work (seeing potential infringements of rights and harms) reason work (working how best to proceed and justifying this) and role work (taking the role of assessor seriously and trying not to compromise standards and values). In effect, they had to re-invent how to execute their roles and responsibilities – going back to the basics of what the legal and ethical obligations were and how to achieve these without being able to deploy usual procedures. In his research interview and survey response, this manager was also performing as an ethical practitioner in detailing what he and his team did - making visible the background work needed to undertake what was usually a much less fraught (though always difficult) assessment process (performance work).

Towards the end of the interview, when asked if he wanted to add anything, he said:

I think it's more important than ever, in a situation like this, to have as good a grasp as you can have of your own values and the ethical framework within which you're expected to work. Because it actually helps you to do the job properly. It isn't [the case] that 'Well we've got this massive emergency, we can just forget about all that human rights stuff ... we've just got to get on with it'. I think the opposite is the case. I think that it actually helps people make difficult decisions. We'll be thinking through ... what are the principles here? What are the kind of starting points? ... We need to have that confidence in our ethics more than ever.

## **2. New rules introduced, but are they fair?**

Over time, more government and organisational rules or guidance were introduced, often applying to everyone in all situations. Social workers recounted situations in which they ignored, circumvented or challenged the new rules. Notable examples include: going to a service user's home to give vital support or conduct an assessment in spite of organisational rules banning all home visits; proceeding with moving children to foster care or the homes of new adoptive parents in spite of government restrictions on travel and movement; challenging blanket rules that limited the freedom of movement of people living in residential care more strictly than the general population and took no account of individual circumstances.

In these situations, most social workers gave accounts of their reasoning, since breaking or challenging rules is not to be undertaken lightly. As with the earlier example of the DoLS manager acting in a vacuum of guidance, in challenging new rules, these social workers needed to go back to basics by re-visiting the core purpose and values of social work, such as its commitment to human rights as enshrined in the Human Rights Act (1998). This

included working on their professional ethical identity as good social workers – putting the interests of service users first, defending people’s rights to services and choices and being fair in allocation of time and resources, for example. However, these values and virtues could not be taken for granted in new circumstances, which required a re-evaluation of when someone’s freedom of choice or best interests could be over-ridden for the good of the wider community or general public (reason work). Here the blueprint function of phronesis as described by Kristjánsson et al. (2021), which goes beyond extant professional values, is useful as a way of encouraging *critical* identity work in the context of the bigger picture of changed and changing social and political circumstances (a more extensive framing than is usually required in everyday social work). Framing work is arguably the most important element of ethics work, as this encapsulates how social workers see and understand the situation at hand. Using the language of the neo-Aristotelian phronesis model, this is how social workers *constitute* the scenario. The concept of framing work adds further imagery to the efforts of social workers. Using the metaphor of a painting or photograph, putting themselves in the frame is vital (reflexivity), along with paying attention to the background terrain, looking for the people in the shadows, widening and narrowing the lens to enable the ethically salient features to be identified and their textures, contours and location in the broader landscape to be perceived and inspected. The social worker quoted at the start of this paper, who spoke about the energy needed to be vigilant, was identifying an important quality or capability that was very relevant during the pandemic, which could be regarded as part of framing work, namely, *ethical vigilance*. This refers to the need for heightened awareness of potential harms and infringements of rights that might be missed due to stress or the unusual times.

***Example: Challenging blanket rules imposed in sheltered accommodation***

An Integrated Care Social Worker, working with adults with complex and frail needs, gave an example of an ethical challenge in his response to the survey in May 2020. He learnt from a community nurse that one of the people for whom he was responsible had moved out of his apartment in extra care sheltered accommodation (managed housing which provides support for residents) and was staying in a hotel. The social worker spoke on the phone to the man, who angrily told him that the accommodation provider was offering a shopping service and was not allowing residents to leave their apartments to shop for themselves, blocking access at the front door. The social worker calmed the man down, asked permission to call the Deputy Managers of the accommodation and persuaded him to return to his apartment. The social worker described the details of his delicate and strategic conversation with the Deputy Managers (whom he already knew and had a good relationship with), acknowledging their commitment to protect all residents, their anxieties about keeping people safe, and that it was ‘great’ that they were offering a shopping service. He then presented his own concerns, engaging in ethical reasoning, using the language of rights:

I discussed that the client has the same rights to liberty as anyone else and that the right to liberty under the Human Rights Act (Article 5) may be restricted only in explicit and finite circumstances. I also discussed the fact that under the new

Coronavirus Act 2020 my understanding was that the police have the authority to interfere with this qualified right - if they believe that a person is not going out for daily exercise or food shopping. We all came to the agreement that If the provider felt that my client is putting himself and others at risk by not adhering to the Act they would discuss this with him and me, and discuss the situation with their allocated (and friendly) police support [officer] who would then clarify the situation with my client. Then I proposed a Family Group Conference (FGC) as a way to resolve this and future issues. (I have learnt that using a family group conference to support my clients can transform such situations and encourage practitioners and providers to focus on empowering people like my client to draw on his strengths and networks).

The social worker framed this case as an infringement of human rights and recognised his own role as this man's social worker entailed acting as an advocate for him. But rather than simply putting the arguments, he engaged in relationship work, engaged with the managers' and man's emotions (anger, anxiety) and drew on his experience of the positive impact of FGCs to try to find a sustainable solution. In the written account of this ethical challenge the social worker is, in effect, affirming and performing his ethical identity as a good, fair and sensitive social worker.

### **Beyond the pandemic**

The discussion in the previous section has illustrated some of the ways that elements of professional ethical wisdom were drawn upon and deployed during 2020 in the UK, including the time when Covid-19 restrictions were first introduced and people and professionals were functioning in 'crisis mode'. The survey and interview data provide a unique insight into the workings of professional ethical wisdom as circumstances demanded a conscious process of ethical reflection and re-evaluation on a scale and at a depth far beyond the usual processes. This raises questions about what social workers and the social work profession can learn from the ethical re-evaluations that took place during the height of the pandemic for practice going forward and in particular practice in situations of crisis (climate crisis, violent conflict, other health epidemics or pandemics).

This was the subject of the follow-up international webinar series in April-May 2022. Detailed findings have been summarised in a report (Banks & Cairns, et al., 2022). Of significance for this paper is the fact that webinar participants were still facing restrictions in most countries and were still very much affected by the stress and trauma of working at the height of the pandemic, which they were keen to share. Some of the key issues that had come up in the 2020 survey were still exercising their minds, having had two years for reflection and to try out new ways of working. These issues included: self-care (how to ensure social workers look after themselves in stressful times, whilst maintaining support for service users); digital working (how to do this well, in the right circumstances, aware of its potential for both inclusion and exclusion of different people); and reductions in bureaucracy alongside increasing professional discretion (how to maintain positive implications of increased discretion without introducing unfairness or over-burdening social workers).

These are big issues, encapsulating ongoing (and perhaps perennial) dilemmas for social workers and many other human service professionals. All demand exercise of professional ethical wisdom, which the experience of working through the pandemic has perhaps honed, for some people at least. The last point, about reductions in bureaucracy and the use of discretion, relates particularly to the illustrations used in this paper where social workers filled vacuums in rules and guidance and challenged inappropriate or unfair rules. A clear illustration of the positive impact of relaxation of rules was given by a Danish social worker in the European webinar. He spoke about the role Danish social workers have in supporting job seekers:

... in many ways, social workers felt in that part of social work, working with the unemployed, that they had a better connection, better relation to the citizens, because they did not have to control if they had applied for three jobs ... and they did not have to meet up every week to document that they are still job seekers. So in many ways, it has been a discussion after the pandemic, can we stay with that regulation? Because in that sense, it's easier to do the social work, it's easier to handle ethically and not spend that much energy on the control part of social work.

The implication of this comment is that by focusing on building good relationships with job seekers, helping them develop skills and confidence, working with them at their own pace, social workers can do more productive and respectful work. This would, however, rely on social workers' use of professional ethical wisdom in working sensitively with each person to develop a programme or plan that suited their circumstances. It would also require a rethinking of approaches to social welfare policy – a reconsideration of the extent to which social inequities are accepted and ameliorated, and the terms of the social contract between the state and citizens (what responsibilities citizens have in return for welfare services) (Shafik, 2022a; 2022b). Welfare policies designed to control or punish people require extensive systems of bureaucracy, as do welfare policies that regard professionals as enforcers of rules.

### **Concluding comments**

While it is not within the power of individual social workers to change systems of state welfare, it is important that their views are fed into organizational and statutory systems for reviewing and changing current policies and practice through professional associations and campaigning groups. It is also important that social workers and social work organisations use the experience of working during the pandemic to question ways of working and expand the space for professional ethical wisdom. The need to rethink how to do social work during the pandemic, and the revisiting of fundamental ethical values that clearly took place, provide important stimuli and insights for professional development and policy practice (social workers influencing policy development).

Resources to encourage ethical reflection were developed out of the 2020 research, including case examples of ethically challenging situations for use in team or student discussions (Banks, Rutter and Shears, 2021; Banks, Bertotti et al, 2021). The fact that the case studies are based on accounts from social workers practising during the height of the

pandemic may make them seem less relevant and useful now. However, their depiction of social work during a period of crisis and uncertainty is actually very relevant both to everyday practice in 'normal' times and to practice in other types of crisis. For when readers engage with the case studies, they have to think more deeply about what counts as ethical practice in the situations depicted, causing them to reflect on and reconsider the nature of ethical practice more generally.

This paper has offered some preliminary thoughts on revisiting the concept and practice of professional ethical wisdom, alongside the Jubilee Centre's model of neo-Aristotelian phronesis, in the context of the practice of social workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is scope to draw further on insights from the phronesis model and to undertake more focused follow-up research with some of the social workers in the 2020 study on how their ethical re-evaluations during the pandemic have influenced their current thinking and practice.

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