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Embodied practice in a disembodied time: How the COVID-19 pandemic shaped direct work with children and young people

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions imposed in the UK had a significant impact on social work practice with children and young people. As has been widely reported, practitioners were deprived of multisensory information in their assessments and of opportunities to connect with children. In this article, we consider data from Scotland, created through interviews with practitioners during May 2021, a time of tentative optimism between periods of widespread lockdown. The Scottish policy context offers particular tensions and contrasts through which to understand how practice was impacted by physical distancing measures. Just prior to the beginning of pandemic restrictions, in February 2020, the report of Scotland's Independent Care Review, *The Promise*, was published and emphasized the importance of love, nurture, and care for children. *The Promise* encouraged professionals to 'bring their whole selves to work' and to relate to families in ways that are natural, and not constrained by ideas of professionalism. The following month, the country was in a national lockdown with strict restrictions on the contact workers could have with families. Drawing on data from practitioners working in this context, we aim to explore how social workers reconceptualized direct work with children during this period.

KEYWORDS
children, COVID-19, direct work, social work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Social work with children and their families in the context of child welfare concerns relies on embodied forms of practice (Ferguson, 2018). Social workers use their senses in order to understand children's home environments and their levels of safety and comfort within those environments (Ferguson, 2017; Green, 2021). The use of touch is a complex and contested aspect of social work practice with vulnerable groups (Baeza et al., 2019; Fowlie, 2015; Green, 2017). However, communication with children, particularly in care settings, necessarily encompasses more than verbal communication,

incorporating touch, and the use of silences and material objects as ways of communicating care and love for children (Emond, 2016; Green et al., 2021). Research undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic has reported that not being able to use touch, and their wider senses, in social work encounters with children raised significant challenges for practitioners (Ferguson, Pink, & Kelly, 2022), reinforcing Ferguson's (2008, 2010) previous findings about the ways in which social work is accomplished through mobile, embodied, and sensory practices.

Direct work with children, as a particular aspect of social work practice, involves play and playfulness (Whincup, 2017) and often

relies on practitioners being alongside children whilst engaging in meaningful activities together (Tait & Wosu, 2012). It is a process of being with children (Luckock & Lefevre, 2008) and may also involve social workers supporting children's main caregivers to be with them in ways that are intended to be nurturing, for example, by cooking, reading, or playing (Whincup, 2017, p. 977). Direct work with children may involve the use of creative methods (Prynallt-Jones et al., 2018), music and sound (Lefevre, 2004), and forms of proximity and touch (Sadzaglishvili et al., 2023) as means of developing trust and overcoming communication barriers. However, these complex forms of embodied practice were limited, challenged, and altered by the social distancing policies enacted during the coronavirus pandemic, in order to control the spread of the virus (Qian & Jiang, 2022).

In the UK context, a complete national lockdown was first introduced in March 2020. Following this, the UK population 'then experienced multiple cycles of being required to adhere to transmission-reducing behaviours, followed by periods of relaxation of requirements followed by the reimposition of restrictions' (den Daas et al., 2023, p. 441). In Scotland, compliance with national restrictions was reported to be high (Dixon et al., 2022; Downey et al., 2022), with people across the UK trying to adhere to current advice (Reicher & Drury, 2021) despite the barriers and differential consequences for some groups (Burton et al., 2023).

In this paper, the authors explore how national lockdowns, involving strict restrictions on movement, and related social distancing measures impacted on social workers' direct work with children and families. In terms of the measures in place, although national directives were provided by the devolved governments of each of the UK nations, there remained room for interpretation of the rules by local authorities. Social workers were at the 'frontline' of the pandemic providing essential services (BASW, 2021). However, discretion remained possible as to the definition of 'essential services' and how these were to be delivered. The urban fieldwork site for this study adopted a cautious approach, prioritizing public and employee health and discouraging home visits except where there were immediate risks to children. This meant that social workers and their managers needed to find ways to remain in close contact with children, young people, and families, whilst minimizing physical proximity and indoor visits. We present data collected through interviews with practitioners during this period. Fieldwork was concentrated on a particular moment in time: May 2021. At this point, practitioners had navigated a period of approximately 14 months of pandemic-related restrictions. Participants were therefore able to reflect on how they had adapted to the challenges of having limited in-person contact with children and young people and their families. By this stage, social workers were also tentatively beginning to evaluate the long-term impacts of the increased digitization of practice brought about by the pandemic (Ashcroft et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2022; Steiner, 2021). There was an atmosphere of cautious optimism at the point of fieldwork, as vaccines rolled out across the UK and pandemic-related restrictions decreased. However, many uncertainties and anxieties remained.

2 | CONTEXT

The policy landscape for child welfare and protection social workers in Scotland appeared to encapsulate particular paradoxes going into the first national lockdown. In February 2020, the team behind Scotland's Independent Care Review published seven reports based on evidence from care experienced children, young people, and adults, along with professionals and volunteers working in the field. These reports began to set out pathways to radical reform of Scotland's 'care system' (Independent Care Review, 2020d) and an ambitious plan for how this might be achieved (Independent Care Review, 2020c) and funded (Independent Care Review, 2020a, 2020b). The findings of the review questioned the level of regulation of children's out-of-home care, querying how such a rule bound and complex system could truly offer children the experiences of love, care, and commitment that Scotland aspires to for its children (Independent Care Review, 2020e; Scottish Government, 2017). The reports of the Independent Care Review (2020d, p. 11) engaged explicitly with the concept of 'love', whilst simultaneously resisting any need to define the concept. The reports envisioned a reformed and far more relational approach to ensuring children's safety and well-being, requiring of professionals to 'bring their whole selves to their work' (Independent Care Review, 2020d, p. 22, 101). This implies that forms of practice would be deeply embodied and would support practitioners to enact care for children in their everyday work.

The following month, in March 2020, Scotland was in lockdown with the entire population required to stay as much as possible in their homes and with strict restrictions on movement, meetings between households, and requirements of social distancing. Having been advised by *The Promise* on the need to draw far closer to the children and young people they work with, Scotland's child welfare professionals were instructed to stay away from the families they were supporting, in order to reduce transmission of the COVID-19 virus (Scottish Government, 2020a). This seems to represent a policy paradox for social workers working with children, young people, and their families. However, as explored in this paper, this paradox was, at least to some degree, only apparent, with the pandemic presenting opportunities as well as challenges for practice. This paper is focused on one particular aspect of social work practice with children and families: direct work with children. Although inevitably straying somewhat into work with parents and carers, we aim to specifically explore how social workers sustained their relationships to, and direct work with, children and young people in the context of pandemic-related restrictions.

3 | METHODOLOGY

The research study reported upon in this paper was carried out in an urban Scottish local authority during 2021. The timing of this fieldwork in May 2021 provided a snapshot of the experiences of social workers in between national lockdowns.[1] At this time, there was a feeling of optimism as social work services began to move towards greater normalcy after a period of unprecedented change and

uncertainty. An invitation to participate was sent to all children and families social work practice teams in the local authority fieldwork site in early 2021, to engage participants. Those social workers who responded were contacted independently by Author 1; participants were therefore self-selecting. As the invitation to participate related to direct work with children specifically, participants may have had a higher-than-average interest in the importance of direct work with children and young people.

Semi-structured qualitative research interviews were carried out with participating practice team social workers over video call ($n = 6$) by Author 1. These were recorded and transcribed in full by Author 1. All of the interviews were carried out in a confidential space with participants' cameras switched on and with no one else present in the call except the researcher. Video call had become a typical mode of working for social workers, and this was mirrored by the method used to conduct the research. All participants were of White European heritage, five were women, and one man participated. All participating practitioners had a minimum of 2.5 years of experience as qualified social workers. The study participants worked in three different parts of the urban fieldwork site, so did not all work in the same teams: meaning they had different managers and they worked in varied local community contexts. However, all worked within teams serving areas of significant socio-economic deprivation and within the same local authority. The themes of digital and hybrid social work practice, a focus of the research, are mirrored in the way the research was conducted. As practitioners were questioning the impact of the newly adopted ways of practicing, so too was the researcher considering a similar aspect of the research method and how an online interview differs to an in-person interview and what the effect of this method will be on the data (Southerton et al., 2022).

Social workers working in practice teams are at the 'frontline' of social work, allocated to children and their families to support them in a wide range of situations and working with children who may have had no experience of social work previously and are experiencing this for the first time, through to children who have experienced foster care, kinship care, the Children's Hearings system, or Permanence Orders, and have potentially had social work intervention throughout their whole lives. The wide variety of work carried out by the participants meant there were a wide range of direct work experiences with children and their families.

Emphasis was placed on the variety of ways in which a child's voice can be ascertained by a social worker and that this is not limited to direct verbal communication but could include interpretation of body language, drawing, and writing and indirect communication or interpreting what is not said. With this in mind, participants were asked to reflect on working with children up to the age of 18, with no lower age limit.

3.1 | Ethics

The study reported on here was granted ethical approval by Edinburgh Napier University's School of Health and Social Care Ethics Committee and the urban local authority chosen for the fieldwork. Participants were recruited with the support and assistance of their employer, and although they chose freely to engage with the study, it is possible that they participated with an awareness of findings being shared with their agency. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying information has been removed to protect the confidentiality of the research participants and of the families they work alongside.

As in so much of the world, COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns have had a significant impact upon every aspect of the lives of people living in Scotland, including but not limited to the impact on working practices. The information gathered from participants was therefore sensitive, and to ensure participation in the study did not negatively impact upon participants' well-being, a range of supports and signposting was discussed and outlined in the participant information sheets given to participants before they engaged with the study. Emphasizing the participants' right to withdraw at any point was also important and this was highlighted in the participation information sheets, but also throughout the research process, including after transcription. However, no participants chose to withdraw from the study. When the transcripts were created and completed, they were sent to the participants to ask whether there were any changes they would wish to make to ensure that these were an accurate reflection of the participants' thoughts and feelings and that they were comfortable with any interpretation or nuance that may have taken place throughout the transcription process.

3.2 | Data analysis

The data were analysed using a thematic approach, giving a deep and robust understanding of the experiences of individual participants (Miles et al., 2014). After the interviews were transcribed, participants were asked to reflect on the transcript and to consider whether it accurately reflected their meaning. Author 1 sought the participants' reflections on their experiences in practice; this integrated both their opinions and their visceral feelings seen through the lens of hindsight. The opportunity to revise the transcript of their interview after creation gave participants a chance to ensure the data faithfully reflected their understanding of their experiences (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). The initial analysis was carried out using Nvivo 12 software, and a code of meanings and themes was drawn from the data using the research questions as a template. This was then revised, and further evidential connections were established across the different participants data, including patterns of similarity and difference (Liamputtong, 2019).

For the purposes of this paper, the data from the study were reanalysed with specific focus on the connections that social workers reported being able to make and sustain with children and young people during the pandemic and particularly during the national lockdowns and rules around social distancing (Scottish Government, 2020c). These rules restricted the contact that different households were able to have with one another and were in place for much of the

time between March 2020 and well into the summer of 2021, after the fieldwork for the study had been completed. The authors were interested to understand what challenges and barriers these circumstances had created for social workers in attempting to work directly with and connect to children and young people in practice. We were also interested to understand how participants had overcome these barriers and the ways in which practitioners had been able to continue direct work with children over the period.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Disembodied practice

Not being able to be in the same physical space as families created new challenges for practitioners. During the national and local lockdowns, social workers relied extensively on technology in order to sustain contact with children and to assess their welfare. This was experienced as limiting, due to the sensorial deprivation of virtual visits to children's family homes. Participants commented on feeling deprived of their senses: smell, touch, sight, hearing, and mobility. Often, practitioners felt the information they were receiving through virtual communication was superficial or staged and it lacked detail, richness, and nuance.

> Because there is almost ... a false representation of seeing that child virtually in time, you know, on screen, seeing that, you know, you don't get the full picture. (Nicole)

Participants in the study talked about digital means of communication feeling thinner, less rich, and less visceral. Some participants worried that they were gaining a 'false' picture of the child's well-being as they could not use the full range of senses to assess the home circumstances and to 'read' the child's mood and level of comfort.

> There's just nothing like being in the same room as a child or young person and picking up on, you know, subtleties. (Fiona)

> You can't always get the social cues from children online so if you're not, if you don't physically see them, you can't see, if they are maybe looking distressed, you know, holding their hands, just little physical cues I think that you need to be able to see in person. (Nicole)

When working with younger children, participants were concerned that undertaking direct work might create distress that they would then not be able to respond to without being physically present with the child. This made some workers more cautious in the work they undertook with children, as they had a sense of being unable to read children's cues accurately and also felt limited in the range of responses they could offer to children's potentially raised emotions. Digital communication methods also meant that parents and carers were often present throughout interactions, and indeed, this was necessary when children were younger, preverbal, or had communication difficulties. Participants reported that this could create barriers to direct communication with children, as possibilities for one-to-one interactions were reduced or non-existent and calls could feel as if there was a pressure on children to communicate, whether or not they actually wanted to talk to their social worker.

> There's no opportunity for them to say how they're feeling about things, 'cos their Mum's holding the phone, following them around, you know. (Katie)

As Katie describes, for young children, the expectation that they communicate virtually with their social worker, when they had not been used to this, could be very difficult. Even when it became possible for social workers to see young children in person, interactions could be experienced as strangely disembodied, as the fears of transmission and rules on 'mixing' between households in the early days of the pandemic influenced practitioners and made the natural physical interactions of hugging young children feel potentially risky for all parties. In the following extract from a research interview with Beth, she described meeting up with a young child in person.

> I naively presumed he would have been in the pram when he came out and he ran towards me and I stepped, I stupidly stepped back and his face, and I have never felt so awful. (Beth)

This 'stepping back' was natural for the worker in the circumstances of the pandemic, when in the early days, transmission routes were unclear and there were no effective treatments or vaccines. However, for young children, being denied an expected hug could be experienced as a rejection and therefore as disruptive to previously warm working relationships between practitioners and young children.

> Small children in particular tend to come up and give you a hug and what are you supposed to do? 'No! Stop there'. (Luke)

> They're quite physical people, and I know whenever I visit, sort of toddler-ish age of, during visits in the past they climb on you, they high five you, they hand you toys and I think it's difficult to explain to younger children, so they might, it might be quite confusing, and it might make you seem quite standoffish. (Lydia)

Ultimately, age was a defining characteristic in ascertaining whether virtual means of communication were positive. With younger children, workers identified that they were merely observing or

monitoring using virtual methods; with teenagers, they identified barriers relating to expressing feelings, particularly with eye-to-eye contact; and with older children and adolescents, practitioners described exploring creative interactions together.

4.2 | Digital connections

Despite the significant challenges described above, working digitally with children and young people was perceived by participants in the study as having potential benefits, as well as challenges. All participants found some benefits of digital practice when working with children in middle childhood and adolescence. One significant benefit was the possibility of spending more time with children who were living in a family placement a long distance from their original community and from the social worker's base. Rather than a social work visit to a busy household potentially involving the whole family, when it came to one-to-one digital connections, some sustained individual work was made more possible. Fiona described working with James who was creating a narrative for himself during digital meetings that helped him to make sense of difficult past experiences and of his current circumstances.

> James has got this different identity, and he's got red hair as well. And so, I think he sees it all as in common with Ron from Harry Potter and so it really led to some quite interesting direct work and I think we wouldn't have had that if … these whirlwind trips I would have had, I would have got about three hours in total in the village down there. (Fiona)

As Fiona describes, an in-person visit would have involved a long journey, reducing the time available to spend with James on arrival. Having the focus of working together one to one and online allowed for meaningful work to happen at a distance. The physical distance allowed more, rather than less, focus on the individual child, increasing reciprocity and rapport. These opportunities for virtual connections were valued by participants as allowing time for focused and potentially restorative work with older children.

A related benefit of digital connections with older children and young people was that this increased the choice and control that it was possible for them to exercise. As the following extract from a research interview with Nicole illustrates, distance allowed some young people to control the work they wanted to engage in with their social workers.

> It's worked well with older children because they've had a lot more control over that, and they've been able to say, 'no' more easily. (Nicole)

For children and young people, being in meetings that were digital was presented as potentially empowering by practitioners, as there is the possibility of leaving the call easily, if the young person needed to

do so. Having meetings online was also seen as reducing the stigma for children, as they would not be seen by their peers joining a meeting with professionals, as they might previously have done.

> But I think sometimes it was maybe a bit embarrassing for him having to either come out of class to attend something like this [a formal meeting]. (Nicole)

Nicole felt that for young people, being in a meeting without the social worker being physically there to speak on their behalf allowed more space for the young person themselves to communicate. Nicole also perceived communication via digital means as being potentially helpful to parents, with the distance allowing parents time and space to communicate their needs and views more effectively.

> Parents have found asking for what is going on and what they need over a text or an email easier for them, and they can put everything down. (Nicole)

Although participants found there were challenges and difficulties in virtual communication methods, the ways in which digital practice could actually support better communication were valued. The less direct communication methods utilized during lockdown meant children, young people, and parents had time to consider their participation in meetings and the involvement they were used to having from their social worker. There was greater space for carers, families, and children to process their feelings, as there was a natural pause added to the communication process. At times, the online interaction process negated the need for a social worker to respond to the child's needs because the child could control the situation for themselves and find ways to regulate or step away from the meeting.

4.3 | Socially distanced play

Not all communication between social workers and families takes place through verbal discussion, with play and playfulness being key means of communicating with children. Participants described playful interactions having to be more orchestrated at the height of the pandemic, due to the need to assess any pandemic-related risks and plan the time that was spent with children. As Beth commented, there was a need for more formal arrangements to be made with carers in order to see children in person.

> 'Let's just go and have a catch up', [I would] text either the foster parent or the carer and say, 'I'll come pick them up on the way from school bring them back at such and such a time'. Can't do that. (Beth)

When social workers were able to spend time with children outdoors, they found ways to play that were socially distant but allowed for playfulness, communication, and warmth. Many spent time with

children by going on bike rides or outings together. Beth described playing in the park with a child.

> But we totally forgot about just sitting in the play park and having a picnic. And just sitting where there's nobody else around, nobody comes near you, we'll sit and have an ice cream, we'll just talk about kind of what will happen next and what we're doing, take a ball with us. It just almost made us go back to really simple stuff; social workers are notorious for overcomplicating things; we are terrible for it. (Beth)

Whilst being together in person with children was seen as important by the social workers interviewed for the study, they also emphasized the possibilities for supporting and joining in play with children from a distance. Luke recalled delivering baking kits to families in order to support them to bake together at home.

> So, it tended to be more saying to parents, you know, 'what would help?' and them identifying things and me trying to get that for them. So, I spent a lot of time delivering, like, craft materials and baking kits and pens and pencils and drawing books and kind of things to occupy the children when they were at home. (Luke)

Delivering material resources for play felt important to participants and was a tangible difference they could make to children's lives at an uncertain and sometimes frightening time. Some practitioners engaged in play remotely with children, drawing on those resources, whilst at other times, material resources being delivered and the absence of the social worker from the home meant that parents and carers became more actively involved in restorative work with the children in the household and were also able to take a more active part in 'family time' online.

> The carers or the foster carers have been involved in, in being able to supervise that to try and either reduce, or make it work a bit better. (Nicole)

Children, and parents, were released from the demands of school, sometimes from work, and from the social demands placed on families. As discussed above, there was more control available to children and to families about the nature of their engagement with services. This allowed some families to become more playful and nurturing and ultimately to flourish. In some situations, they had the opportunity to 'redo' childhood for themselves and their children who may have had a period of care away from the family home. In the following quote, Luke describes how parents engaged in play with their children in a restorative manner.

> I mean the best bit was being able to supply stuff for the kids to do with their parents, and I think them

saying, 'oh the kids are really bored, can you get them some things' and being able to drop off stuff that they would do. And I think actually a lot of parents who we work with, I think they missed out a lot of those, kind of, early experiences that actually sitting down and drawing pictures and making cupcakes and stuff. It's probably quite good for them as well, it's probably filling in some developmental gaps. (Luke)

Katie agreed that the overall reduction in social work contact had neutral or positive impacts on family functioning, at least for some families.

> Some of the families that I work with have managed fine and they've done great, and you think really: do they need me in their life, pushing in all the time? (Katie)

Whilst the reduction of direct information sharing and embodied practice was difficult for participants, they did also recognize virtual means of communication as presenting opportunities to build trust with families and carers. Indirect means of communication and the provision of material resources to families for play facilitated more freedom in the working relationship. When social workers called into the homes of families from their own homes, this could also be felt as a leveller that increased feelings of reciprocity and trust, as described here by Nicole.

> A colleague told me 'The child always wants to talk to me because my cat will come in the video' and they're interested in seeing that and learning a little bit about you and very interested and saying, 'oh, you're at home', and you know, asking these types of things … as a kind of initial bond there with you, you know already that you're both doing these things and they can physically see you. (Nicole)

Reciprocity is an important aspect of a caring relationship and opening a window into the social worker's home sometimes allowed that reciprocity to grow in a way that was different to when the practitioner was previously stepping into the child's environment, and their own home life was kept wholly separate. Allowing families into their homes in this way was experienced as challenging by some participants, as it blurred previous boundaries and made it difficult for practitioners to separate their home and work lives and selves. However, some participants felt comfortable with sharing their home environment in order to play creatively and introduce games using third objects. As Lydia recalled, online play could mirror previous in-person experiences they had shared with the child.

> I've played pretend McDonalds recently. I've had drawing competitions. Kids are quite resilient, and I think kids have adapted quite well. (Lydia)

Some participants attempted to embrace the opportunity to change the way they carried out direct work and build relationships with children and young people. Ultimately, the camera provided a window into their own world as well as the child's and they made use of this. This adaptability went a long way, but participants did note that there were limits to the kinds of play available to them and the children they were working with during the pandemic. Social workers recognized the difficulty in carrying out activities that involved sharing space, food, and objects. When sharing was carried out and it went one way, it was not reciprocal. So, social workers handed out food parcels and toys, but they could not sit and share an object as a part of their direct work like they had done before lockdown, they could not sit and eat together as they had before, and they could not play a game that involved sharing physical objects, like jigsaws and puzzles.

> There's been no exchange of like anything I've touched, and they've touched you just can't do it, games and stuff. (Katie)

Through outdoor play, digitally enabled online play, and through the provision of material resources for play, social workers overcame the barriers to playful connection that the lockdown restrictions placed between them and the families they were supporting. Participants in the study recognized the limits and challenges to these 'workarounds', but also reflected that there were ways in which they could connect with children through different means that had advantages, and also supported some parents and carers to engage in more playful and restorative ways with their children and young people. For children, play is a serious business, and practitioners communicated an understanding of this in the creative ways they found to connect playfully with children and young people and the ways they supported their play within their homes, whether or not the social worker was present.

5 | DISCUSSION

In March 2020, social workers who were working in child welfare and protection roles in Scotland were required both to 'bring their whole selves to work' (Independent Care Review, 2020d, p. 22, 101) and, at the same time, to keep their physical distance from families (Scottish Government, 2020a). The participants in the study reported on here had worked through a period of balancing these competing demands, in a work setting where high levels of caution around in-person contact with children and families were central to local policy. As outlined in the findings above, participants used a number of different strategies to remain in close communication with children, young people, and their families and carers.

All of the social workers who participated in the study shared a determination to continue to offer 'direct' work to children, despite the many barriers to this. In research interviews, participants reflected on the creative methods (Wrench, 2018) and workarounds they had employed in order to continue this work. The main strategies

described involved digital forms of communication, supported play within households, or playful time spent with children outdoors (Ferguson, Kelly, & Pink, 2022; Pink et al., 2022). Whilst participants acknowledged age-related challenges to these strategies, with younger children feeling harder to reach, these ways of working with children were all to some extent successful.

Research participants reflected on the difficulties, particularly in working with young children who could not understand the health risks of COVID-19 or the sudden changes in adult behaviours and in the shape of their lives. Many of the regrets described by participants centred on their work with very young children and their concern that physical distancing was experienced by preverbal children as rejection, especially when young children sought physical proximity or touch or were denied the warmth of a hug on greeting. Virtual work with young children was also experienced as more indirect, as digital communication was mediated by parents and carers. All participants reported a sense of sensorial deprivation in their practice, echoing the findings of larger scale studies (Ferguson, Kelly, & Pink, 2022; Ferguson, Pink, & Kelly, 2022). Yet, through simple activities, such as playing in the park or going for a bike ride outdoors, social workers found ways to spend time with children and young people in person and to talk through plans and concerns with older children.

The practice of 'zooming in and out' of homes through virtual visits raises significant questions of practice and ethics. As Dillon et al. (2021) highlight, the 'digitally enabled "windows" into children's home environments' that were torn into the fabric of everyday lives held the potential to become panoptical sites of family surveillance (Herbert, 2023). The direct links between the homes of practitioners and of the families they worked with also blurred boundaries in new ways, forcing social workers, children, parents, and carers to redraw the professional relationships between them. Yet, participants in our study suggested that not only was this renegotiation possible but also that the reduced formality of digital communication and the control over joining and ending meetings at the touch of a button had advantages for families. Furthermore, whilst direct digital communication introduced many new challenges, it also created new opportunities for reciprocity and for social workers to bring a little more of their whole selves to work, as pets and aspects of their home lives appeared in the frame.

The COVID-19 pandemic was experienced highly differentially by children within the UK (Holt & Murray, 2022). The children and young people who social workers support could reasonably be expected to be more 'vulnerable' to the experience of lockdowns (Scottish Government, 2020b). Nonetheless, participants in this study described how some families they were working with used the opportunity of time spent at home together for more playful activities. Social workers supported this through the delivery of art, baking, reading, and play materials.

The provision of resources directly to families in Scotland was a wider feature of the pandemic, as services attempted to ensure that children received their entitlement to free school meals and other financial supports whilst schools were closed (Scottish Government,

2020b). As Treanor (2020) has argued, the apparent national discomfort around giving families living in poverty money directly to feed their children at home reveals a serious conflation of poverty and adversity in children's lives. Social workers participating in this study reported on how a relaxation in the rules around direct distribution of resources to families was a positive aspect of the pandemic. This relaxation enabled practitioners to address at least some aspects of material poverty that were impacting on the care and opportunities that children could be offered at home (Gupta & Blumhardt, 2016), through taking the resources they asked for literally to their door.

Although the UK government introduced programmes of support to mitigate the effects of the lockdown on families, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the test and trace support payment scheme (UK Government, 2020),[2] the nationally administered schemes required socio-economically disadvantaged people to apply to access the funds and to evidence their eligibility, an experience comparable with accessing pre-existing state benefits (Machin, 2021). In contrast, social workers participating in the study spoke about distributing resources on the basis of what families needed and requested. The local authority response to meeting people's needs was in this respect different to the national UK schemes. Instead, it was more comparable with the 'mutual aid' distribution in New York as described by Arons (2022). Free from oversight of national government, relief could be distributed in a way that responded to people's needs. There were less barriers to access, and resources could be distributed by people who had a knowledge of and investment in the local community.

This finding speaks to long-standing questions around the increasing division between child protection assessment and interventions on one hand and the distribution of welfare on the other, within child and family services in the UK (Featherstone et al., 2019). Within this study, social workers reflected about the positive impacts that being able to provide physical resources had for parents, carers, and children. Speaking to reformist suggestions around a public health approach to preventing child abuse and neglect (Higgins et al., 2022) that recognizes the social contexts for harm in families and the iatrogenic harms (Jones, 1991) of existing risk-focused report and investigate approaches in child protection.

At first glance, there appears to be a tension between the directives of Independent Care Review (2020d) and the restrictions to physical movement and proximity imposed on social work practice in order to control the spread of COVID-19 (Scottish Government, 2020a). *The Promise* calls for more connection, greater reciprocity, and a more equal balance of power between families and professionals. The pandemic and the measures in place to contain it created physical distance and fears of transmission between people. However, participants in this study described how this crisis created new conditions of decreased institutional control and more flux in organizational procedures. Through these chinks of light, radical forms of connection were enabled. Boundaries were removed, and whilst there were discomforts around this for children and practitioners alike, ultimately, whether remotely or in person, social workers described doing work that was recognizably child led and guided by principles of reciprocity.

6 | LIMITATIONS

The findings reported here were created through research interviews with a small sample of social workers ($n = 6$), at a particular moment in time (May 2021). All of the social workers who participated worked for the same urban local authority in Scotland and had the benefit of at least 2.5 years' post-qualifying practice experience at the time of the study. All those who chose to take part reported a strong commitment to sustaining their direct work with children and young people. However, the research sample were self-selecting, and individuals may have chosen to participate in order to reflect on the challenges of this work during the pandemic. The validity of the qualitative data presented here was ensured through audio-visual recordings, line-by-line transcription and coding, and through member-checking of transcripts. The authors make no claims as to the generalizability of the findings and rather present these as a valid snapshot of social work practice in motion, as practitioners adapted to fluid and challenging policy demands and public health directives.

7 | CONCLUSION

The social workers who participated in this study all found ways of sustaining direct work with children that felt authentic to their values, in the midst of the uncertainties and chaos of living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. The creativity and adaptability that was expected of social workers in their practice role gave space for participants to find ways to work with children that were meaningful and playful. Although they were discouraged from 'bringing their whole selves' to work in a physical sense, the pandemic allowed practitioners to connect with children, young people, and families in ways that did draw on their 'whole selves'. Social workers were enabled to connect to older children and young people directly through digital means and were also enabled to provide material resources to families, which supported playful communication within the home setting. Spending time together with children outdoors was another strategy described by participants, through which at least some degree of physical proximity was made possible.

We do not claim that the pandemic made for better direct work with children and young people. There were significant challenges, fears, anxieties, and losses brought about through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the findings presented here act as counterpoint to much of the existing literature published on social work with children and families during this period. The social workers who participated in this study reported on the ways they had adapted their practice in order to ensure that they retained meaningful connections and communication channels with children and young people. The commitment to direct work with children and young people repeatedly expressed by participants in this study suggests a need for further research that seeks to understand the nature of direct work post-pandemic. Direct work with children and young people remains underresearched and undertheorized within the social work literature. The commitment of the practitioners who took part in this study serve as a reminder of the need for this gap to be

addressed and of the importance of this aspect of practice to social workers themselves.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was conducted with ethical approval from the Edinburgh Napier University School of Health and Social Care Ethics Committee.

ENDNOTES

[1] On the 26th of March 2020, the first national lockdown began in Scotland; this was phased out between the 29th of May and the 10th of July 2020. On the 9th of October, restrictions were reintroduced including stay-at-home orders.

[2] The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was a furlough scheme that provided grants to employers who could not operate at full capacity but retained existing staff through the lockdown.

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