

The team as a secure base revisited: remote working and resilience among child and family social workers during COVID-19

Social work teams can provide a secure base for social workers, supporting them to manage the emotional demands of child and family social work (Biggart *et al*, 2017). The informal support available within teams can promote resilience, sustaining workers who undertake vital work with vulnerable children and families. As the Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated increased remote working, social workers have needed to maximise their use of virtual networks and navigate new ways of connecting with colleagues. This article draws on research with social workers undertaken between 19th March and 13th June, 2020. We outline social workers' and managers' perspectives on team support, examining the extent to which social work teams can function as a secure base in the context of remote working. We conclude with the implications of remote working and consider the legacy of Covid-19 for child and family social work.

Introduction

On the 23rd of March 2020, the UK began a period of lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the exception of limited essential home visits, social workers were directed to work from home. Since social work is a collaborative rather than individual activity, remote working has significant implications for practitioners, particularly in terms of their resilience.

Research has indicated that social work teams play a vital role in social worker resilience, retention and decision-making. Informal discussion between colleagues can provide emotional containment (Ruch, 2007) and positive co-worker relationships can act as a buffer to work stress, promoting resilience and retention (McFadden *et al*, 2019). 'Verbal reasoning' with colleagues can help workers to resolve challenging situations (Avby *et al*, 2015:58) while informal discussions within teams can provide a 'frame' for sensemaking (Helm, 2016: 29) and decision-making (Saltiel, 2016). These studies emphasise the importance of face-to-face interactions within teams, and the centrality of the office in providing a space for these vital, ad hoc discussions. There is a risk that working remotely may make it more difficult for social workers to access the support they need. Here, the concept of the team as a secure base (Biggart *et al*,

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3 2017) is useful. Being able to hold in mind a representation of the team as a secure
4 base may help workers to feel supported, even when they are physically distant from
5 their colleagues.
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10 **The team as a secure base**

11 The secure base concept comes from attachment theory, which identifies relationships
12 as key to emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988). A relationship with an attuned and
13 available caregiver can provide a 'secure base' in times of stress, helping the child to
14 manage their emotions, develop resilience and navigate the world with confidence
15 (Schofield and Beek, 2014). As the child develops, they rely less on physical proximity
16 to their secure base figure, and begin develop internalised representations of their
17 caregivers which they are able to call to mind in time of anxiety when their caregiver
18 may not be immediately available. This in turn helps the child to regulate their emotions
19 and develop resilience. The secure base model is also relevant to emotional regulation
20 in adulthood. It has been argued that the social work team can provide a secure base
21 for social workers, helping them to manage the emotional challenges of practice
22 (Biggart *et al*, 2017). Child and family social work is a rewarding, yet emotionally
23 demanding, profession (Horwath, 2016). To practice effectively, workers require the
24 opportunity to process their emotions, and the team environment can provide a safe
25 space for this. Sharing experiences, discussing practice and feeling understood by
26 one's colleagues can provide emotional containment, which restores the capacity for
27 workers to think clearly about their work.
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43 Social workers have reported that when their team embodies the secure base
44 dimensions of availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and a sense of
45 belonging, it can help them to manage stressors and feel more confident in their
46 practice (Biggart *et al*, 2017). By contrast, where the team does not embody these
47 dimensions, workers may be 'preoccupied with anxiety and fear about unresolved
48 issues at the interface of self and work' (Biggart *et al*, 2017: 127). This has implications
49 for their resilience and capacity to support children and families. In this study, we
50 examined social workers' experiences of working remotely through the lens of the
51 secure base.
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The research

This research was carried out between 19th March and 13th June. In early March, the research team at *Name* University were interviewing social workers across England for a research project focusing on the retention of experienced practitioners. Following the announcement of lockdown in England, social workers began to describe changes to their work practices in response to social distancing measures. We began to capture these responses as part of a secondary research project focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on child and family social work. The study was granted ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and additional ethical approvals were obtained from the research governance panels of the participating local authorities. Two researchers at *Name* University undertook 31 in-depth qualitative interviews with child and family social workers across 9 local authorities (LAs) in England. This included: 2 service managers, 10 team managers, 10 senior social workers and 9 social workers.

Participants were recruited via a gatekeeper in their organisation, usually the Principal Social Worker for the LA. Participants were drawn from a range of services, including family support, child protection, fostering and adoption. With the exception of two social workers who shared a team, each participant was drawn from a different team.

During the interviews, we captured social workers' and managers' perspectives on their practice as they adapted to remote working. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis. An inductive approach was used to identify themes in social workers' experiences of working from home. Social workers tended to focus on the impact of working away from colleagues, and how their teams provided virtual support. This led us to revisit the concept of the team as a secure base in social work (Biggart *et al*, 2017). A second stage of theoretical thematic analysis was therefore undertaken, using the secure base model as a sensitising concept to frame the emerging themes. In this short article, we focus on three key areas:

1. How social workers experienced the sudden shift to increased remote working.
2. The virtual social work team as a secure base.
3. The challenges for sustaining the team as a secure base when working remotely.

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3 As an interview-based study, our research had some limitations. Our picture of team
4 support and remote working is grounded in the perceptions of individual social
5 workers. These views may not be representative of their team's functioning as a whole.
6 Here, observational research on virtual team support would be useful, alongside
7 triangulation of workers' perspectives within a shared team. However, in this study we
8 were mindful of the ethical imperative to minimise the burden of research on social
9 work teams at a time of unprecedented pressure and change. Despite this, the
10 research enabled us to generate a vivid picture of social workers' experiences as the
11 pandemic unfolded. It is likely that remote working will increasingly become a feature
12 of social work as the pandemic continues. This research has enabled us to capture
13 and anticipate some of the challenges that will need to be addressed.
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26 **1. The shift to increased remote working**

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28 Aside from urgent home visits and occasional trips to the office to access paper files,
29 workers needed to adapt quickly to remote working. For those who already worked at
30 home part of the week, this transition was easier. Others described hastily improvised
31 workspaces in living rooms, on kitchen tables and beds. Some LAs offered a grant of
32 approximately £200 to enable workers to purchase equipment such as desks, chairs
33 and headsets. As well as assisting with working from home, this helped workers to feel
34 valued by their organisation and more positive about working remotely. However, in
35 the first week following lockdown, some workers expressed a sense of
36 disconnectedness from their team. This stemmed from the loss of physical connection
37 to the team (from not being in the office), but also the initial difficulties in forming a
38 digital connection (due to IT issues, and unfamiliarity with new technology). This
39 physical disconnect led to the loss of their team as secure base. Face-to-face contact
40 was perceived to be crucial in sustaining secure base relationships:
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51 I think this is the kind of job where you need people around, you need the support, you
52 need to talk through cases, you need to be able to go back to a haven where people are
53 going to understand what you're doing. If you don't have that face-to-face contact with
54 people you lose those relationships, and you lose that confidence.... (SW30)
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3 Whilst the need to stay connected with their team was important, it was also vital for
4 workers to create boundaries between private and professional spaces. Prior to
5 lockdown, the separation between the office and home environment had provided an
6 important psychological boundary. As one worker stated:
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10 My life is in sections... I've got a work section and a home section... (SW36)
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14 However, working from home eroded this boundary, and work began to encroach on
15 home-life:
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18 You have to adjust to turning your home into a professional environment. That has
19 drawbacks, because that's the place where you wind down, and it was for me before,
20 but now it's not quite the same... (SW52)
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24 Compartmentalization is a psychological defence mechanism (Bekes *et al*, 2019)
25 where the individual temporarily splits off, or 'compartmentalizes' something stressful,
26 enabling them to move on to another task. Compartmentalization can help workers
27 to separate work from home life. When working from home, many workers found it
28 harder to compartmentalize, particularly when they had challenging interactions with
29 families online:
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33 You're inviting families into your home... it makes your safe space feel less safe. (SW58)
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37 Social workers with caring responsibilities had to cope with these alongside their work
38 with families, which made work/home boundary management even more difficult. The
39 erosion of boundaries negatively affected workers' resilience; some described working
40 from home as more 'intense' (SW50) and 'tiring' (SW49) and 'unsustainable' (SW58).
41 There was also a risk that wishing to protect themselves from work/life intrusion could
42 make workers less available to families.
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47 48 49 50 **2. The virtual team as a secure base**

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52 During the first few days of lockdown, workers felt particularly disorientated by the loss
53 of contact with their team. However, there was greater optimism among the workers
54 we interviewed towards the end of lockdown. As new systems were created for staying
55 in touch, the virtual team began to operate as a secure base.
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3 Team members described using Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp and email to keep in
4 touch. This typically consisted of a combination of video, audio call and text
5 messaging. Teams had previously used some of these methods alongside face-to-
6 face contact. Following lockdown, these became the main channel through which
7 social workers accessed peer support. As workers became more familiar with remote
8 working, their initial concerns began to dissipate as they adapted with support to new
9 circumstances:
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16 I've had to learn about very quickly about technologies... I didn't think I'd ever have a
17 supervision over computer! It's actually worked out okay, we're very well supported and
18 we've got a lot of social networks going. I thought I was going to feel isolated... not being
19 able to discuss things with people but I haven't felt like that at all. (SW42)
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24 Cooperation is a key facet of the secure base team – in order to feel confident in one's
25 ability to practice effectively (self-efficacy), practitioners need to feel that they can work
26 with others to find solutions (Biggart *et al*, 2017). As SW42's comments illustrate, as
27 workers found new ways to stay connected, they were more able to work cooperatively
28 and felt more confident in their practice. As virtual connections were established, the
29 team could fulfil some of its other secure base functions. A sense of team membership
30 and belonging can help workers to feel less isolated, particularly when working away
31 from the office (Biggart *et al*, 2017). Recognising this, team managers described
32 making a conscious effort to create shared, virtual team spaces for collaboration and
33 informal connection:
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42 I create a close, family atmosphere in the team... During Covid-19 we have a morning
43 meeting every day at 8:45. Last week, we had a virtual breakfast. Next week, we've got
44 a virtual lunch. The week after we've got a quiz one lunchtime. (PA41)
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49 Most social workers described feeling 'very well supported' or 'more supported' than
50 usual as a result of keeping in touch with colleagues virtually. Some reported that their
51 relationships with colleagues were closer, and that their team had become more
52 cohesive during the crisis. This sense of belonging could help social workers to feel
53 valued within their teams, despite the physical distance.
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58 The combination of increased check-ins with colleagues and a reduction in travel time
59 meant that some workers felt less 'tired' and more 'energised' (SW51) in their
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3 interactions with families. Typically, the formal team spaces such as weekly meetings,
4 peer supervision and training workshops were set up first – this left an initial gap in
5 terms of informal, peer support. An important dimension of the secure base team is
6 acceptance - workers need to feel comfortable to express vulnerabilities and feel
7 accepted when they do so (Biggart *et al*, 2017). When working remotely, these
8 informal opportunities were initially lost. This created a sense of emotional 'build up',
9 which couldn't be expressed in formal spaces, such as the virtual team meeting:
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16 The manager will always ask how we are all feeling and... people are a reluctant to talk
17 about how they're really feeling in that sort of environment. Yesterday the team manager
18 was off... it was like the barriers were down. We've got a fantastic relationship with our
19 manager... but without that management element, the floodgates opened. ... Everybody
20 was saying how stressed they were, how anxious, how we were working at capacity...
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24 (SW45)

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26 This cathartic opening of the emotional floodgates during this video call was ultimately
27 helpful. The team were able to acknowledge their anxieties and this led to a supportive
28 and productive conversation with their manager. As lockdown continued, social
29 workers themselves created informal spaces to express day-to-day concerns, such as
30 team WhatsApp groups. In these informal spaces, workers could feel more confident
31 to share their worries, frustrations, seek reassurance and discuss ideas about cases
32 without fear of censure. In
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39 A key aspect of the secure base team is availability – a sense of trust that 'people are
40 there for me' (Biggart *et al*, 2017: 122). In the absence of face-to-face contact, workers
41 signalled their availability to colleagues in various ways. One team set up a 'virtual
42 water cooler meeting' (SW49) where social workers could simply dial-in, work together
43 or talk with no fixed agenda. Even when they were not directly interacting, switching
44 their online profile to 'available' could help foster a sense of availability. Managers and
45 senior social workers made particular efforts to signal their availability, scheduling slots
46 in their diary, which were visible to the team. Having a visibly available manager helped
47 social workers to feel more supported and secure.
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55 Sensitivity is a key quality of the secure base team. Feeling 'known and understood'
56 by one's team (Biggart *et al*, 2017: 123) can, in turn, help workers to feel remain
57 sensitive to the needs of colleagues and service users. Social workers particularly
58 valued managers who understood their own personal situation during lockdown, for
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3 instance offering them the flexibility to log-on after hours where they had caring
4 responsibilities during the day. However, when working remotely, it could be difficult
5 for team members to be as 'tuned in' (Biggart *et al*, 2017: 123) and sensitive to the
6 needs of colleagues as they would be in the office – these challenges are explored
7 below.
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11 **3. The virtual team as a secure base – challenges and risks for resilience**

12 Remote working presented challenges for the team's functioning as a secure base.
13 Informal ways of keeping in touch, whilst helpful for connecting, could emphasise
14 difficult dynamics within the team. Some workers, particularly those that were newer
15 to the team, felt marginalised in virtual interactions and spoke of in-groups and out-
16 groups reflected in the team's WhatsApp interactions.
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25 These informal ways of staying in touch could also further erode the work/home life
26 boundary:
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30 It gave me anxiety because on a normal day, in normal life pre-COVID, my office phone
31 would be switched off after working hours. I learnt a long time ago that I have to have
32 my boundaries. So when you see sometimes 18 WhatsApp messages... It gave me
33 anxiety... It's difficult when you're a larger group, you have the popular voices. It's almost
34 like being back at school. The same old names pop up... the stronger people in the
35 group tend respond to themselves, it's not inclusive. (SW46)
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40 Despite attempts to signal their availability, remote working did create a loss of
41 immediacy in terms of peer support. Rather than having a brief conversation in the
42 office, workers now had to make a conscious choice to contact a colleague:
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45 Picking up the phone... and explaining the situation is very different to going back to the
46 office and seeing a worker you can talk to about something... it comes naturally,
47 whereas having to pick up the phone, you think twice... (SW30)
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52 Knowing that their colleagues and managers were also busy and under pressure could
53 dissuade workers from picking up the phone. As the weeks went by, this loss of
54 immediate support from colleagues began to have an impact:
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3 You would normally just have a little chit chat to your friends while you're making a cup
4 of tea, that kind of thing I do miss. I think it impacts on your emotional wellbeing (SW45)
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8 After the initial adjustment period, teams that already provided a secure base tended
9 to continue to do so during lockdown. For other teams, working remotely compounded
10 existing difficulties. Teams that were less established, those with a higher proportion
11 of temporary staff and newly-qualified social workers (NQSWS) tended to experience
12 greater challenges. For these teams, the loss of the office space was particularly
13 significant. When working in the office, a worker might readily offer advice to a NQSW,
14 or naturally fall into conversation with a new colleague. However, lack of face-to-face
15 contact could make it far more difficult to initiate supportive relationships. NQSWS
16 were at particular risk, as they lost the important vicarious learning opportunities
17 provided by the office environment. Lack of face-to-face interaction could make it
18 difficult for colleagues to identify when they needed support. Sensitivity is a key
19 dimension of the secure base team – attuned and attentive colleagues might notice a
20 colleague having a difficult day and offer empathy, support and understanding (Biggart
21 *et al*, 2017). When working remotely, this was more difficult:
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33 For NQSWS, it only takes a couple of cases to fall off a cliff. Without the right support,
34 people just become isolated and the work drops off. Some people just don't talk about it
35 – and it's only by observing people in an office situation that you realise they are getting
36 into difficulties (SW54)
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40 Collegial discussions in the office provide an important space for discussing cases,
41 helping social workers to 'confirm or amend their judgements' (Biggart *et al*, 2017:
42 125). While case discussions could take place virtually, the range of perspectives
43 workers would naturally receive in the office were limited. Some workers noticed that
44 their perception of risk had begun to shift as a result. For instance, one worker said
45 she could no longer tell if new referrals were more serious or whether 'they felt more
46 heavy' because she was less able to share her thinking.
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55 **The future of remote working in child and family social work**

56 The concept of the team as a secure base (Biggart *et al*, 2017) provides a useful way
57 to conceptualise the challenges of remote working during Covid-19. The model
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3 suggests that a positive mental representation of one's team can promote a sense of
4 competence and resilience among workers, even where one might be temporarily
5 physically distant from one's colleagues. While they differed in their views on how often
6 it was necessary, the majority of social workers we spoke to identified the need for
7 some form of in-person contact with colleagues to sustain them in their work. In
8 Bowby's original (1988) model, the child's ability call to mind internalised
9 representations of caregiver was dependent upon prior face-to-face, supportive
10 interactions with their caregiver. Similarly, where social workers described feeling
11 supported by their team they tended to also report having established these face-to-
12 face supportive relationships with their team prior to lockdown. This suggests that
13 social work teams can provide a secure base for virtual working, but there may be
14 particular challenges for less-established teams, new workers and less experienced
15 practitioners who may be less able to draw on established relationships within the
16 team to sustain them.

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28 After the initial adjustment period, many of the social workers in our sample described
29 how their teams were able to successfully function as a secure base. Where their
30 teams were able to create virtual spaces signalling availability, sensitivity, acceptance,
31 cooperation and a sense of belonging, workers described being more able to manage
32 the emotional demands of virtual practice. The dimensions of the secure base model
33 (see Biggart *et al*, 2017) may provide a useful framework for managers to consider
34 when creating virtual team spaces. Identifying the virtual team spaces for keeping in
35 touch (such as the team WhatsApp group, 'watercooler' style virtual meetings, peer
36 supervision etc.) and considering the extent to which each of these spaces embody
37 the five secure base dimensions (Biggart *et al*, 2017) - and where there are gaps -
38 could be a helpful exercise. Our research suggests that managers may need to pay
39 particular attention to the secure base dimension of sensitivity. In the office, social
40 workers could recognise subtle behavioural cues that might indicate that a colleague
41 was struggling. When working remotely, social workers described this as much more
42 difficult. This suggests that proactive and regular checking-in with individual workers
43 is vitally important – particularly for new team members or those who may be reluctant
44 to disclose that they are struggling.

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58 This research supports Biggart *et al*'s (2017) findings that supervisors and managers
59 have a key role to play in the team's 'beliefs about the availability of support' (Biggart
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3 *et al*, 2017: 127). Social workers who described their teams as successfully providing
4 a secure base for remote working, generally identified a strong steer from the team
5 manager in creating supportive spaces, signalling their availability and remaining
6 sensitive to the individual needs of team members. It was beneficial for workers to
7 have some spaces (such as Team WhatsApp groups) without management oversight,
8 enabling them to speak more freely. However, managers needed to remain alert to
9 difficult dynamics and situations where less-established team members might feel
10 marginalised. It is therefore important that attention is paid to supporting those workers
11 (such as NQSWs) who may not have established relationships with colleagues. This
12 could include identifying opportunities for shadowing colleagues on virtual home visits
13 and setting up mentoring, or 'buddying' opportunities.
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23 Other issues facing workers were practical (no dedicated office space to work safely
24 and confidentially) and psychological. Social workers described various helpful
25 strategies for 'switching off' from work. This included muting work discussions on
26 instant messaging services after a certain time, and putting their laptop away as a
27 psychological way of 'clocking off'. These small, practical actions could have important
28 psychological benefits.
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34 Agile working practices have been a feature of social work for some time
35 (Jeyasingham, 2016) and concerns have been raised about the impact of remote
36 working on worker resilience (Horwath, 2016). Many workers were concerned that the
37 fact they had 'coped' during lockdown would act as a justification to shift entirely to
38 remote working as a cost-cutting measure. Some workers questioned whether they
39 would stay in the profession if working exclusively from home became mandatory. In
40 the future, it is likely that social work practice will continue to operate as a hybrid model,
41 combining face-to-face and virtual practice. It is therefore vitally important that a
42 thorough consultation is undertaken on the impact and sustainability of remote
43 working. Before remote working becomes 'the new normal' an evidence base needs
44 to be developed which identifies the specific risks of remote working for workers'
45 resilience, reasoning and retention.
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