



Visiting social workers should beware of areas off the tourist trail in countries like Jamaica

Avoiding international incidents

Conducting assessments in other countries may be dangerous or illegal, so social workers must beware of the risks, writes Julie Griffiths

Every year, one in a hundred social workers travels overseas to conduct assessments, according to Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB). But the charity warns that most of them are unaware that they could be acting illegally. Many may assume their work would fall within the law because they have been asked to do the assessment by their managers or even the courts. Some may even view it as a perk.

The figure, estimated by the CFAB, is based on the number of incidents the charity stumbles upon while dealing with about 400 cases of overseas child assessments each year.

CFAB chief executive Andy Elvin says UK social workers should refuse requests to undertake assessments overseas.

“Other professionals don’t assume they can work overseas,” he says. “For example, doctors can’t go overseas and practise. Nor can lawyers. It’s ludicrous to even consider it, yet social workers make these trips.”

A typical scenario is a looked-after child who has a family member overseas offering to take care of them; this might be an aunt in Jamaica or grandparents who have retired to Spain. Because a local authority is responsible for the child’s welfare it needs to check the safety of the placement. Likewise, a judge might intervene to order that the placement is considered further.

Yet working with relevant social services overseas is more likely to result in a positive outcome, Elvin says.

“Part of an assessment is understanding the local facilities such as education and

health. Local social services will know about culture and legal frameworks better than someone from Britain. It also makes sense to ensure local services are aware that a vulnerable child is in their area in case the placement breaks down.”

Given the practice is illegal, social workers are also leaving themselves vulnerable to invalidating any insurance that covers their work in the UK because they are operating outside their jurisdiction.

Should there be a case of misconduct which results in a social worker being sent to prison abroad, a local authority is likely to find itself facing a hefty legal bill and damage to its reputation. In the worst case of a social worker being harmed, the authority would be in even more trouble because it has breached its duty of care towards its staff.

Elvin finds it curious that, although risk assessments are in place for visiting homes in dangerous areas in Britain, there is a disregard for safety overseas.

“They have not let the country know that they are coming or why,” Elvin says. “If you go into a remote area with interpreters you might attract unwelcome attention. Social workers are not, for example, going to be visiting the tourist areas of Jamaica. You’re putting yourself at risk.”

Danger overseas is more commonplace than one might expect, says Elvin, pointing to anecdotal evidence of social worker kidnappings in eastern Europe.

There is also the chance that the assessment will become known to the authorities locally, which could lead to problems. For example, if a social worker is caught practising in South Africa without being registered there, they face a \$10,000 fine and six months in prison.

CFAB is carrying out a rolling programme of free training to social work departments about overseas assessments. It recommends that social workers asked to go abroad speak to the charity for free advice.

Alternatively, Elvin recommends social workers inform managers that doing so is not only illegal and dangerous but it is putting both the employee and the council at considerable risk when, in many cases, it is probably cheaper to go through CFAB. “Usually the costs are much less than sending someone overseas. They are certainly less than the costs attached to a social worker who encounters problems.”

→ Free CFAB advice line: 0207 735 8941. CFAB fees range from £350 to £2,500.



Elvin: Concern at disregard for safety during overseas visits