

The Code of Ethics for Social Work

Statement
of Principles

BASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers



ETHICS

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Introduction – Scope and objectives

The British Association of Social Workers is the professional association for social workers in the United Kingdom (UK). The Code of Ethics states the values and ethical principles on which the profession is based. The Association has a duty to ensure as far as possible that its members discharge their ethical obligations and are afforded the professional rights necessary for the safeguarding and promotion of the rights of people who use social work services. People who use social work services may be individuals (children, young people or adults), families or other groups or communities.

The Code is binding on all social workers who are BASW members in all roles, sectors and settings in the UK. Social workers have a responsibility to promote and work to the Code of Ethics in carrying out their obligations to people who use social work services, to their employers, to one another, to colleagues in other disciplines and to society. The Association commends and promotes the Code of Ethics to all social workers, educators and employers of social workers in the UK.

BASW's Code of Ethics first adopted in 1975, has been revised and updated on several occasions. This Code of Ethics replaces the 2002 version. It takes as its starting point the internationally agreed Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and

International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), (2000) and has also incorporated the international statement, Ethics in Social Work – Statement of Principles (IFSW and IASSW, 2004) with some revisions. These key documents were reviewed and agreed in 2010 by IFSW and IASSW.

Sections 1 and 2 of this document draw on the background, definition and statement of ethical principles of the IFSW/IASSW (2004) document, with amendments including the addition of 'professional integrity' as a value alongside human rights and social justice. Section 3 comprises practice principles which indicate how the general ethical principles outlined in Section 2 should be put into practice in a UK context.

Background

1.1 Ethics in social work

Ethical awareness is fundamental to the professional practice of social workers. Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to those who engage with social workers. Respect for human rights and a commitment to promoting social justice are at the core of social work practice throughout the world.

Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are dis-advantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to work with vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. Social work values are embodied in the profession's national and international codes of ethics. Working definitions of ethics and values are given in the Appendix.

The Code comprises statements of values and ethical principles relating to human rights, social justice and professional integrity, followed by practice principles that indicate how the ethical principles should be applied in practice.

The practice principles are not intended to be exhaustive as some ethical challenges and problems facing social workers in practice are common and others are specific to particular countries and settings. The Code is not designed to provide a detailed set of rules about how social workers should act in specific situations or practice guidance. Rather, by outlining the general ethical principles, the aim is to encourage social workers across the UK to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case in accordance with the values of the profession.

Definition

Ethical problems often arise because social workers, for example:

- **Work with conflicting interests and competing rights**
- **Have a role to support, protect and empower people, as well as having statutory duties and other obligations that may be coercive and restrict people's freedoms**
- **Are constrained by the availability of resources and institutional policies in society.**

1.2 The international definition of social work (2014)

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”

www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice.

Theory:

Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence informed knowledge derived from research and practice evaluation, including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context. It recognises the complexity of interactions between human beings and their environment, and the capacity of people both to be affected by and to alter the multiple influences upon them including bio-psychosocial factors. The social work profession draws on theories of human development and behaviour and social systems to analyse complex situations and to facilitate individual, organisational, social and cultural changes.

Practice:

Social work practice addresses the barriers, inequities and injustices that exist in society. It responds to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems. Social work utilises a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments. Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. These include counselling, clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work, and family treatment and therapy as well as efforts to help people obtain services and resources in the community. Interventions also include agency administration, community organisation and engaging in social and political action to impact social policy and economic development. The holistic focus of social work is universal, but the priorities of social work practice will vary from country to country and from time to time depending on cultural, historical, legal and socio-economic conditions.

It is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive.

** The definition was revised in 2014.*

2. Values and ethical principles

2.1 Human rights

Value

Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other related UN declarations on rights and the conventions derived from those declarations.

Principles

1 Upholding and promoting human dignity and well-being

Social workers should respect, uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being. They should work towards promoting the best interests of individuals and groups in society and the avoidance of harm.

2 Respecting the right to self-determination

Social workers should respect, promote and support people's dignity and right to make their own choices and decisions, irrespective of their values and life choices, provided this does not threaten the rights, safety and legitimate interests of others.

3 Promoting the right to participation

Social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that enable them to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives.

4 Treating each person as a whole

Social workers should be concerned with the whole person, within the family, community, societal and natural environments, and should seek to recognise all aspects of a person's life.

5 Identifying and developing strengths

Social workers should focus on the strengths of all individuals, groups and communities and thus promote their empowerment.

2.2 Social justice

Value

Social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work.

Principles

1 Challenging discrimination

Social workers have a responsibility to challenge discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation or spiritual beliefs.

2 Recognising diversity

Social workers should recognise and respect the diversity of the societies in which they practise, taking into account individual, family, group and community differences.

3 Distributing resources

Social workers should ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need.

4 Challenging unjust policies and practices

Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, unfair, harmful or illegal.

5 Working in solidarity

Social workers, individually, collectively and with others have a duty to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and work towards an inclusive society.

2.3 Professional integrity

Value

Social workers have a responsibility to respect and uphold the values and principles of the profession and act in a reliable, honest and trustworthy manner.

Principles

1 Upholding the values and reputation of the profession

Social workers should act at all times in accordance with the values and principles of the profession and ensure that their behaviour does not bring the profession into disrepute.

2 Being trustworthy

Social workers should work in a way that is honest, reliable and open, clearly explaining their roles, interventions and decisions and not seeking to deceive or manipulate people who use their services, their colleagues or employers.

3 Maintaining professional boundaries

Social workers should establish appropriate boundaries in their relationships with service users and colleagues, and not abuse their position for personal benefit, financial gain or sexual exploitation.

4 Making considered professional judgements

Social workers should make judgements based on balanced and considered reasoning, maintaining awareness of the impact of their own values, prejudices and conflicts of interest on their practice and on other people.

5 Being professionally accountable

Social workers should be prepared to account for and justify their judgements and actions to people who use services, to employers and the general public.

3. Ethical practice principles

Social workers have a responsibility to apply the professional values and principles set out above to their practice. They should act with integrity and treat people with compassion, empathy and care.

The ethical practice principles apply across the UK but they are not intended to be exhaustive or to constitute detailed prescription. There will be variations in interpretation and guidance in the different countries. Social workers should take into account appropriate codes of practice, legislation, governance frameworks, professional practice and training standards in each UK country, provided they are consistent with the Code of Ethics. The Code is also supported by other BASW policy documents.

Social workers should strive to carry out the stated aims of their employers or commissioners, provided they are consistent with the Code of Ethics. BASW expects employers to have in place systems and approaches to promote a climate which supports, monitors, reviews and takes the necessary action to ensure social workers can comply with the Code of Ethics and other requirements to deliver safe and effective practice.

Principles

- 1 Developing professional relationships**

Social workers should build and sustain professional relationships based on people's right to control their own lives and make their own choices and decisions. Social work relationships should be based on people's rights to respect, privacy, reliability and confidentiality. Social workers should communicate effectively and work in partnership with individuals, families, groups, communities and other agencies. They should value and respect the contribution of colleagues from other disciplines.
- 2 Assessing and managing risk**

Social workers should recognise that people using social work services have the right to take risks and should enable them to identify and manage potential and actual risk, while seeking to ensure that their behaviour does not harm themselves or other people. Social workers should support people to reach informed decisions about their lives and promote their autonomy and independence, provided this does not conflict with their safety or with the rights of others. Social workers should only take actions which diminish peoples' civil or legal rights if it is ethically, professionally and legally justifiable.

3 Acting with the informed consent of service users, unless required by law to protect that person or another from risk of serious harm

Social workers should ascertain and respect, as far as possible, each individual's preferences, wishes and involvement in decision making, whether or not they or other persons have powers to make decisions on the person's behalf. This includes the duty to ascertain and respect a child's wishes and feelings, giving due weight to the child's maturity and understanding, where the law invests power of consent in respect of a child in the parent or guardian. Social workers need to acknowledge the impact of their own informal and coercive power and that of the organisations involved.

4 Providing information

Social workers should give people the information they need to

make informed choices and decisions. They should enable people to access all information recorded about themselves, subject to any limitations imposed by law. Social workers should assist people to understand and exercise their rights including making complaints and other remedies.

5 Sharing information appropriately

Social workers should ensure the sharing of information is subject to ethical requirements in respect of privacy and confidentiality across agencies and professions, and within a multi-purpose agency.

6 Using authority in accordance with human rights principles

Social workers should use the authority of their role in a responsible, accountable and respectful manner. They should exercise authority appropriately

to safeguard people with whom they work and to ensure people have as much control over their lives as is consistent with the rights of others.

7 Empowering people

Social workers should promote and contribute to the development of positive policies, procedures and practices which are anti-oppressive and empowering. They should respect people's beliefs, values, culture, goals, needs, preferences, relationships and affiliations. Social workers should recognise their own prejudices to ensure they do not discriminate against any person or group. They should ensure that services are offered and delivered in a culturally appropriate manner. They should challenge and seek to address any actions of colleagues who demonstrate negative discrimination or prejudice.

8 Challenging the abuse of human rights

Social workers should be prepared to challenge discriminatory, ineffective and unjust policies, procedures and practice. They should challenge the abuse of power and the exclusion of people from decisions that affect them. Social workers should not collude with the erosion of human rights or allow their skills to be used for inhumane purposes such as systematic abuse, detention of child asylum seekers and threats to family life of those in vulnerable positions.

9 Being prepared to whistleblow

Social workers should be prepared to report bad practice using all available channels including complaints procedures and if necessary use public interest disclosure legislation and whistleblowing guidelines.

10 Maintaining confidentiality

Social workers should respect the principles of confidentiality that apply to their relationships and ensure that confidential information is only divulged with the consent of the person using social work services or the informant. Exceptions to this may only be justified on the basis of a greater ethical requirement such as evidence of serious risk or the preservation of life. Social workers need to explain the nature of that confidentiality to people with whom they work and any circumstances where confidentiality must be waived should be made explicit. Social workers should identify dilemmas about confidentiality and seek support to address these issues.

11 Maintaining clear and accurate records

Social workers should maintain clear, impartial and accurate records and provision of evidence to support professional judgements. They should record only relevant matters and specify the source of information.

12 Striving for objectivity and self-awareness in professional practice

Social workers should reflect and critically evaluate their practice and be aware of their impact on others. Social workers should recognise the limits of their practice and seek advice or refer to another professional if necessary to ensure they work in a safe and effective manner.

13 Using professional supervision and peer support to reflect on and improve practice
Social workers should take responsibility for ensuring they have access to professional supervision and discussion which supports them to reflect and make sound professional judgements based on good practice. BASW expects all employers to provide appropriate professional supervision for social workers and promote effective team work and communication.

14 Taking responsibility for their own practice and continuing professional development
Social workers should develop and maintain the attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills to provide quality services and accountable practice. They need to keep up to date with relevant research, learning from other professionals and service users. BASW expects employers to ensure social

workers' learning and development needs are met and seek adequate resources to do so.

15 Contributing to the continuous improvement of professional practice
Social workers should strive to create conditions in employing agencies and in their countries where the principles of the Code are discussed, evaluated and upheld in practice. They should engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers to share knowledge and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions. They should endeavour to seek changes in policies, procedures, improvements to services or working conditions as guided by the ethics of the profession.

16 Taking responsibility for the professional development of others
Social workers should contribute to the education and training of colleagues and students by sharing knowledge and practice wisdom. They should identify, develop, use and disseminate knowledge, theory and practice. They should contribute to social work education, including the provision of good quality placements, and ensure students are informed of their ethical responsibilities to use the Code in their practice.

17 Facilitating and contributing to evaluation and research
Social workers should use professional knowledge and experience to engage in research and to contribute to the development of ethically based policy and programmes. They should analyse and evaluate the quality and outcomes of their practice with people who use social work services.

Appendix

Some working definitions of key terms

(adapted from Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*, 4th edition, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, BASW Macmillan Practical Social Work Series)

Working definitions of ethics and professional ethics

Broadly speaking, 'ethics' is about matters of right and wrong conduct, good and bad qualities of character and responsibilities attached to relationships. Although the subject matter of ethics is often said to be human welfare, the bigger picture also includes the flourishing of animals and the whole ecosystem. The term 'ethics' may be used in a singular sense to refer to the study of right and wrong norms of behaviour, good and bad qualities of character; or in a plural sense, to refer to the actual norms and qualities.

Professional ethics concerns matters of right and wrong conduct, good and bad qualities of character and the professional responsibilities attached to relationships in a work context.

Working definitions of values and social work values

In everyday usage, 'values' is often used to refer to one or all of religious, moral, cultural, political or ideological beliefs, principles, attitudes, opinions or preferences. In social work, 'values' can be regarded as particular types of beliefs that people hold about what is regarded as worthy or valuable. In the context of professional practice, the use of the term 'belief' reflects the status that values have as stronger than mere opinions or preferences.

The term 'social work values' refers to a range of beliefs about what is regarded as worthy or valuable in a social work context (general beliefs about the nature of the good society, general principles about how to achieve this through actions, and the desirable qualities or character traits of professional practitioners).

Principles and standards (or rules)

Principles are essential norms in a system of thought or belief, which form the basis of reasoning in that system. In codes of ethics principles are often divided into two kinds:

Ethical principles – general statements of ethical principles underpinning the work, relating to attitudes, rights and duties about human welfare, for example: ‘respect for the autonomy of service users’; ‘promotion of human welfare’.

Principles of professional practice – general statements about how to achieve what is intended for the good of the service user, for example: ‘collaboration with colleagues’.

Principles have a much broader scope than rules (or ‘standards’), tending to apply to all people in all circumstances (although in the case of social work, principles often refer to ‘all service users’). So, for example, ‘social workers should respect the

autonomy of service users’ is an ethical principle; whereas, ‘social workers should not disclose confidential information to third-party payers unless clients have authorised such disclosure’ might be regarded as an ethical standard or rule. Standards can also be divided into two kinds, although often they are not clearly distinguished in codes of ethics:

Ethical standards or rules – some general ‘do’s and don’ts’, sometimes framed as ‘standards’ for example: ‘do not permit knowledge to be used for discriminatory policies’; ‘protect all confidential information’.

Professional practice standards – very specific guidance relating to professional practice, for example: ‘declare a bequest in a client’s will’; ‘advertising should not claim superiority’.

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