



# Professional Standards Guidance

Last updated 31 July 2019

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## Introduction

This document provides guidance on Social Work England's professional standards. The professional standards are the threshold standards necessary for safe and effective practice. They set out what a social worker in England must know, understand and be able to do after completing their social work education or training. Social workers must continue to meet the professional standards to maintain their registration. The standards apply to all registered social workers in all roles and in all settings.

The following is intended to support social workers to understand the standards and to uphold them in their practice. The professional standards are mapped against key areas of guidance to provide greater detail around common themes. The guidance provides further explanation of the professional standards.

This guidance makes clear to the public, to people with lived experience of social work, to employers of social workers, to educators and to other professionals what can be expected of social workers when working with people.

To help you understand this guidance document, we have provided an explanation of the language we use in annex 1.

## Rights

### Knowing the law

Social workers embrace and promote the fundamental rights of all people. They recognise and respect the dignity and worth of everyone and support people to improve their life outcomes. To practise safely, it is essential for all social workers to know and comply with legal frameworks relevant to their work and obligations to protect and promote people's rights.

People should have access to the support and services they need in line with the Equality Act 2010, irrespective of aspects of their identity, including:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex, or
- sexual orientation.

### Advocacy

Social workers support people to be in control of their own lives and advocate for themselves. Sometimes however, people are not able to represent their own interests. In such a scenario, social workers should work with the person to agree a way forward, which could include advocacy by the people in the person's life, including relatives or friends, or non-statutory independent advocacy, and advocacy by professionals. A social worker's role and responsibilities in supporting people to represent their own interests is different when the person lacks capacity, as it then becomes a statutory responsibility.

Social workers can act as advocates on behalf of people to support them to say what they wish and/or to access services. This can be an invaluable role, supporting people to make their voice heard, to exercise their rights and to gain access to the information, services or resources they need. Any arrangement should be established with the person to determine their expectations and goals, and to involve them to the fullest extent that they are able. This should be undertaken in line with the law and after careful consideration of any possible conflicts of

### Standard

Standard 3.1

Standard 4.4

Standard 1.1

Standard 1.2

Standard 1.3

Standard 1.4

Standard 2.4

Standard 3.13

interests. The arrangement and the advocacy undertaken should be clearly documented and reviewed with the person and social workers should remain alert to maintaining professional relationships with people.

### **Privacy**

Unlike confidentiality, which is about information, privacy is about people. Privacy refers to a person's right to a private life and non-interference in their thoughts, knowledge, acts, associations, and property. Every person is entitled to a private life, including when they have a social worker in their lives. Social workers respect and work in accordance with people's rights to privacy, unless there is risk of harm to the person or to others, or if there are other statutory restrictions. It is important that social workers understand their statutory responsibilities around privacy and tell people about these limits.

A person's right to privacy also applies online. Social workers who conduct searches online about people they are supporting, without their consent, could be breaching privacy laws and could potentially be compromising their ethical conduct. Sometimes searching for information in the course of social work is justifiable, such as in an emergency. In such instances, it is important to record actions and justifications.

### **Confidentiality**

Social workers understand when confidentiality applies to the information and data that they gather, communicate, record and store about people using their services. Social workers treat people's personal information with discretion and should only disclose confidential information about people in certain circumstances, and in line with the law. Sharing information is, at times, essential where a person or group's safety is at risk. However, if confidential information is disclosed without authorisation or justification, this could be considered a breach of a person's privacy.

Confidentiality also applies to the use of technology and social media. Social workers should not make reference to anyone they support or disclose personal or professional information about colleagues, managers, or employers on social media, an online forum or blog. Even if the references are anonymised, the identity of the person may be recognisable to others.

Standard 2.2

Standard 1.7

Standard 5.6

Standard 2.6

Standard 5.6

## Working with people

### People as part of families, communities and networks

Social workers understand the importance of relationships between people and recognise them as an asset. This means working with people and seeing them as part of the families, communities and networks they live in. Social workers seek to draw on and strengthen these relationships to promote, maintain and enhance the wellbeing of people. They practise in a way that values and listens to the contribution of the individuals, groups and communities in someone's life. At the same time, they ensure people are supported to make their preferences known about involving others and that these views are respected.

Standard 1.2  
Standard 1.4

### Understanding the role of the social worker

Understanding the role of the social worker means that people can fully participate in the professional relationship and exercise their rights. People have the right to understand what a social worker can and can't do and to have their voices and preferences heard and valued.

Standard 1.1  
Standard 1.3  
Standard 1.7

It is important that social workers provide people with enough information in a format, manner, and language that helps them to understand the role of a social worker in their lives. Social workers should share information and carefully explain proceedings in a way that is appropriate to the people they are working with.

Standard 2.1  
Standard 2.3  
Standard 2.4

### Culture, identity and values

Valuing the cultural needs and values of people is fundamental to social work practice. It is a social worker's responsibility to understand as much as possible about the cultural identities of the people, families and communities they are working with, recognising the significance of culture and belief. This enables social workers to work with people in an appropriate way and use services or communication tools to help them explain their role and listen to people.

Standard 1.1  
Standard 1.4  
Standard 1.5  
Standard 3.5  
Standard 3.14

## Ethics

Ethics in the context of social work is about the professional responsibilities and values social workers have and how they conduct themselves inside and outside the workplace. Social workers respect the distinct beliefs and lifestyles of people, their families, communities and networks. They consider their own personal values, views and preferences and take measures to prevent them from impacting on their work with people. Many social workers follow ethical values or principles to guide their work. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) both have codes of ethics that social workers in England follow.

Standard 1.7

Standard 3.1

Standard 3.7

Standard 5.2

## Social justice

Social workers understand the multiple and intersecting oppressions and disadvantages that impact people, families and communities. They use their professional power in a positive way with their employer and other professionals to uphold standards and decisions and to challenge structures. They pursue positive change, particularly with and on behalf of people, or groups of people, who are vulnerable or facing oppression. They engage in action and dialogue to shine a light on the structures in society that create and perpetuate injustice. Social workers strive for equitable access to information, services, resources, and opportunities. Wherever possible, they work towards strengthening communities, respect ethnic and cultural diversity and value difference.

Standard 1.5

Standard 1.6

## Communication

Communication is at the heart of effective professional relationships in social work and is the means of informing, supporting and listening to people. A social worker will tailor the way they communicate with people and consider factors such as age, disability, experience, culture, belief and intellectual impairment when assessing communication. Information should always be given in a form, language, and manner that people can understand. It is important that social workers reflect their considerations around communication in their records and review them appropriately.

Standard 2.5

Standard 3.10

Standard 5.6

Social workers should consider whether technology-based communication tools can facilitate communication with people. It is important that social workers are familiar with emerging technologies and the appropriate ways of using technology to aid communication.



## Responding to harm, neglect or abuse

Social workers have a responsibility to stay alert to and investigate suspected harm, neglect or abuse and, where risk has been identified, agree plans to address it urgently. Social workers will need to cooperate closely with relevant colleagues and agencies to consider options for action. They will maintain a focus on the person at risk, whatever other demands or issues come to light. All of this must be done within the law, and often under pressure. While the initial priority is safety, responding to risk should also include objectives around the longer-term, including restorative approaches.

Standard 3.2

Standard 3.4

Standard 3.9

Standard 3.12

Standard 3.15

Standard 6.1

Social workers need to be able to recognise and respond to behaviour that may indicate resistance to change, and a lack of cooperation, and take action where necessary, particularly where this is linked to safeguarding concerns.

## Continuing professional development

Continuing professional development (CPD) describes the consideration and the learning activities social workers undertake to develop and improve their practice. Social workers are required to undertake CPD to maintain their registration under standard 4 of the professional standards. This outlines the areas of CPD social workers should consider. We will provide further guidance for social workers on continuing professional development, including the evidence we will require to demonstrate that CPD has been completed, and how we will evaluate that evidence.

Standard 4

### **Supervision and reflection**

Supervision describes the support and guidance social workers access to critically reflect on and improve their practice. It is aimed at supporting social workers to consider their own values and judgements and provides a means for exploring a social worker's practice, including ethical dilemmas, cultural issues and decision-making. Supervision can look different in different workplaces and settings but should be relevant to the social worker's role and take account of development frameworks that they may be working with.

Standard 4.2

Reflection encourages a review of a professional experience to help inform future practice. Critical reflection moves beyond this and encourages the social worker to examine their approach, judgements, decisions and interventions, as well as the steps taken to provide objective support, free from the social worker's own values, views and beliefs.

Standard 4.6

Standard 4.8

## Health and quality of work

### Health

Social workers, like anyone else, can have health problems. Illness and injury needn't necessarily be a cause for concern, but if there is a problem that could either affect a social worker's quality of work or fitness to practise, it is their responsibility to raise this with their employer and Social Work England to agree a course of action, which in some cases may involve restrictions or conditions on practice.

Standard 6.6

Standard 6.7

We recognise that stress and associated health issues can arise in social work. We encourage social workers to seek support when dealing with stress and to notify Social Work England if they think it may impact on their practice. If a social worker fails to inform Social Work England of such issues, regardless of whether it was communicated to their employer, they risk compromising the support they provide to people and may face fitness to practise action.

## Professional integrity

### Duty of candour

Social workers are open and honest with people, including when something goes wrong or has the potential to cause physical, emotional, financial or any other harm or loss. Where they are not open and honest, it can put people at risk and may damage confidence in them as a social worker and the social work profession.

Standard 6.1

Standard 6.3

Standard 6.4

Standard 6.5

Social workers inform the person they are supporting when something has gone wrong. They should explain what has happened, listen to any concerns and offer an appropriate remedy where possible. They should inform people of their right to complain and support them to do so. The support social workers offer should be uncompromised by a complaint or questions people may have.

Standard 6.6

Standard 6.7

Duty of candour also applies to being open and honest with colleagues, employers and relevant organisations, including Social Work England. Social workers are expected to inform us if they are subject to criminal proceedings or a regulatory finding, or if there is anything that might affect their ability to do their job competently or affect their fitness to practise. It is also important that social workers take seriously concerns raised to us and they take part in reviews and investigations, including complying with requests for information.

Where a social worker feels unable to carry out any part of their work they should seek help from their employer or another appropriate authority.

### Conflicts of interest

It is important that social workers demonstrate self-awareness and that they acknowledge their own personal values, views, interests and beliefs. They should take steps to make sure that personal opinions do not impact the people they are working with, nor affect the support they provide to people. Conflicts of interest can occur when a social worker does not take steps to ensure the impartiality of their work.

Standard 1.7

Standard 2.3

Standard 2.7

Standard 3.1

Support should also be free from persuasion based on prior knowledge or association with people, or if there could be benefit to the social worker,

Standard 5.2

their relatives, or friends. Potential or actual conflicts should be quickly identified and considered carefully with employers and a course of action agreed, including referring the person to another social worker. At the heart of any consideration should be people and the quality of support that a social worker is able to provide.

Standard 5.4

### **Professional relationships**

Social workers should maintain clear and professional relationships with people. As social work is fundamentally about people and relationships, it is important that social workers are alert to relationships becoming inappropriate. With the authority, knowledge and influence a social worker has in the professional relationship, there is almost always an imbalance of power. This is important to acknowledge alongside personal values, views and motivations to ensure that they do not influence the relationship.

Standard 1.7

Standard 2.4

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Standard 2.7

Standard 3.1

Standard 5.2

Social workers also recognise that people may read more into the professional relationship with the social worker and try to have their personal or sexual needs met. When this happens, it is essential that social workers maintain professional relationships and report this to their employer.

Standard 5.5

Where a social worker is the subject of a complaint, they should not let this affect the way that they work with and support a person. They should continue to remain professional with the person who has complained.

Professional integrity in social work means upholding the values and reputation of the profession at all times. Conduct outside of work, including but not limited to criminal behaviour, can damage the confidence in the profession and the ability of social workers to support people. Acting in accordance with the values and principles of the profession at all times is also outlined in social work codes of ethics.

### **Gifts, money and hospitality**

Some people may want to give gifts, money or hospitality to their social worker. While this is often well-intentioned, and token gifts or culturally significant gestures can be important within the context of the relationship, social workers should be aware of the potential, actual or perceived impact they could have. Accepting could be seen as the social

Standard 5.4

worker benefitting personally from the professional relationship, as taking advantage of someone in a vulnerable situation, or it may blur the boundaries of the professional relationship. Social workers should always be alert to the potential impact of accepting gifts, money or hospitality and explain this clearly to the people they are working with. Similarly, social workers should refrain from giving gifts to people, as they may feel obligated to give something in return or see the gift as an indicator of a personal relationship.

### **Working with colleagues**

Social workers should establish and maintain respectful professional relationships with other social workers and with colleagues from other professions. They will need to employ the same skills as with the people they support to establish strong relationships which are collaborative, respectful and productive. This is particularly important when working with other professionals or in multidisciplinary teams, where social workers will need to uphold their professional standards and seek solutions and compromises with colleagues that benefit the person they are working with.

Standard 3.6

Standard 3.8

Standard 3.9

## Decision making

Using an evidence-informed approach to make impartial decisions is an integral part of social work practice. Social workers will listen to people, without bias or prejudice, and use evidence from assessments, alongside social work theories, models and research to apply their professional judgement. Decisions are discussed with people, employers, peers or in supervision to challenge thinking and test assumptions. This supports social workers to consider ethical dilemmas, complex situations and potential explanations.

Standard 3.2

Standard 3.3

Standard 3.5

Standard 3.6

Standard 3.7

### **Record-keeping**

Maintaining accurate, clear, objective, accurate and up-to-date records is an essential part of social work. Documenting decisions and actions provides a clear record of work with people. These records are open to scrutiny and help to provide a continuity of support if people are transferred between social workers. They can help to protect people and social workers.

Standard 3.9

Standard 3.11

Standard 5.3

## Technology

Information and communication technology has become a fundamental part of social work practice. Email, text, posting online and sharing information and best practice can be essential tools. Social workers are expected to maintain their capabilities regarding technology, but it is important to remember that the professional standards that social workers uphold also apply online. A social worker should always use technology with the best interests of the people they work with as the primary consideration.

Standard 3.10

### **Social media**

Social media can be a supportive tool to facilitate communication in an online community. However, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and others are public places. When communicating online people often have little control over who sees comments or where they end up, even if they are later deleted.

Standard 5.6

Social workers should be cautious about posting information about themselves on social media if it is something that they would prefer the people they work with did not know about. They should refrain from posting anything that may damage confidence in their work, or the work of the profession. This may include political, religious, or moral beliefs, social activities or personal relationships. Social workers should also be mindful of their organisation's policies and should not post anything that breaches their employer's code of conduct. At all times, they should uphold the confidentiality of the people they support, as well as their colleagues and the people their colleagues support.

It is important to apply stringent privacy settings and review them regularly. Privacy settings can be reset by the social networking site to a default which may not be as stringent as personal settings, so it is important to check these regularly.



## Reporting concerns

Social workers uphold Social Work England’s professional standards.	Standard 5.1
Where others fall short, or if social workers are confronted by wrongdoing or cultures of unsafe or inappropriate practice which could affect the support provided to people, they should report it through the most appropriate means. This could include, but is not limited to, bullying and/or harassment, corruption, unlawful or gross negligent use of public money or resources, practices that pose a risk to public health and safety, or any criminal offence. Social workers should make use of their employer’s policies and procedures for raising a concern around organisational wrongdoing, which may include whistleblowing. We will provide guidance on reporting concerns to us as the regulator for social workers in England.	Standard 6.1
	Standard 6.2
	Standard 6.4
	Standard 6.5

## Social work students

Social work courses aim to ensure that students develop the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the professional standards by the time they complete the course. Although we do not regulate students, we do expect them to understand and work towards our professional standards in preparation for when they apply for registration. Students should make sure that during their course, including while they are on placement, they do not do anything that contravenes the professional standards or the policies and procedures of their course or placement provider.

The qualifying education and training standards are the standards against which we will assess and approve social work education and training courses. You can view and download our education and training standards on our [website](#).

## Annex 1: Language used in this guidance

Throughout the standards and guidance, we use the word 'people'. In this context, 'people' relates to 'people with lived experience of social work' including carers.

Throughout the document 'we', 'us' and 'our' refers to Social Work England.

Where we have used the term 'student', we use this to mean anyone learning, studying or training on a course that will lead to them being eligible to apply to join our register. The term includes trainees, apprentices and practitioners in training or work-based learning.