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BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

## British Association of Social Workers The Code of Ethics for Social Work



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# The Code of Ethics for Social Work

## 1. SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

Social work is a professional activity. Social workers have obligations to service users, to their employers, to one another, to colleagues in other disciplines and to society. In order to discharge these obligations they should be afforded certain complementary rights. The British Association of Social Workers is the professional association for social workers in the United Kingdom. It has a duty to ensure as far as possible that its members discharge their ethical obligations and are afforded the professional rights which are necessary for the safeguarding and promotion of the rights of service users. The primary objective of the Association's Code of Ethics is to express the values and principles which are integral to social work, and to give guidance on ethical practice. The Code is binding on all members, and the Association also hopes that it will commend itself to all social workers practising in the United Kingdom and to all employers of social workers.

## 2. DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK

The Association has adopted the following definition of social work issued by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. It applies to social work practitioners and educators in every region and country in the world.

**The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (2001).**

Social workers attempt to relieve and prevent hardship and suffering. They have a responsibility to help individuals, families, groups and communities through the provision and operation of appropriate services and by contributing to social planning. They work with, on behalf of, or in the interests of people to enable them to deal with personal and social difficulties and obtain essential resources and services. Their work may include, but is not limited to, interpersonal practice, groupwork, community work, social development, social action, policy development,

research, social work education and supervisory and managerial functions in these fields.

### 3. VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Social work is committed to five basic values:

**Human dignity and worth**

**Social justice**

**Service to humanity**

**Integrity**

**Competence**

Social work practice should both promote respect for **human dignity** and pursue **social justice**, through **service to humanity**, **integrity** and **competence**.

#### 3.1 Human dignity and worth

##### 3.1.1 Value

Every human being has intrinsic value. All persons have a right to well-being, to self-fulfilment and to as much control over their own lives as is consistent with the rights of others.

##### 3.1.2 Principles

Social workers have a duty to:

- a) Respect basic human rights as expressed in The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions derived from that Declaration;
- b) Show respect for all persons, and respect service users' beliefs, values, culture, goals, needs, preferences, relationships and affiliations;
- c) Safeguard and promote service users' dignity, individuality, rights, responsibilities and identity;
- d) Foster individual well-being and autonomy, subject to due respect for the rights of others;

- e) Respect service users' rights to make informed decisions, and ensure that service users and carers participate in decision-making processes;
- f) Ensure the protection of service users, which may include setting appropriate limits and exercising authority, with the objective of safeguarding them and others.

## **3.2 Social justice**

### **3.2.1 Value**

Social justice includes:

The fair and equitable distribution of resources to meet basic human needs

Fair access to public services and benefits, to achieve human potential

Recognition of the rights and duties of individuals, families, groups and communities

Equal treatment and protection under the law

Social development and environmental management in the interests of present and future human welfare.

The pursuit of social justice involves identifying, seeking to alleviate and advocating strategies for overcoming structural disadvantage.

### **3.2.2 Principles**

Responsibility for relieving and preventing hardship and for promoting wellbeing is not always fully discharged by direct service to individuals, families and groups. Social workers have a duty to:

- a) Bring to the attention of those in power and the general public, and where appropriate challenge ways in which the policies or activities of government, organisations or society create or contribute to structural disadvantage, hardship and suffering, or militate against their relief;
- b) Use professional knowledge and experience to contribute to the development of social policy;
- c) Promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources within their work, aiming to minimise barriers and expand choice and potential

for all service users, especially those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or oppressed, or who have exceptional needs;

- d) Seek to change social structures which perpetuate inequalities and injustices, and whenever possible work to eliminate all violations of human rights;
- e) Promote policies, practices and social conditions which uphold human rights, and which seek to ensure access, equity and participation for all;
- f) Uphold not only civil and political but also economic, social and cultural rights;
- g) Ensure that they do not act out of prejudice against any person or group, on any grounds, including origin, ethnicity, class, status, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, beliefs or contribution to society;
- h) Challenge the abuse of power for suppression and for excluding people from decisions which affect them;
- i) Support anti-oppressive and empowering policies and practices, and to aim to assist individuals, families, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources and in attaining self-fulfilment, self-management and social well-being;
- j) Recognise and respect ethnic and cultural identity and diversity, and the further diversity within ethnic and cultural groups, and promote policies, procedures and practices consistent with this objective;
- k) Promote public participation in societal processes and decisions and in the development and implementation of social policies and services.

### **3.3 Service to humanity**

#### **3.3.1 Value**

Service in the interests of human well-being and social justice is a primary objective of social work. Its fundamental goals are:

To meet personal and social needs;

To enable people to develop their potential;

To contribute to the creation of a fairer society.

### **3.3.2 Principles**

Social workers have a duty to:

- a) Account for the ethics of their practice in accordance with their national and international codes of ethics;
- b) Place service to humanity in their work before personal aims, views and advantage, fulfilling their duty of care and observing principles of natural fairness;
- c) Use their power and authority in ways which serve humanity, using participatory and open processes to enable service users to realise their aims as far as possible, taking account of the relevant interests of others;
- d) Give service users the information they need to make choices and about their right to complain and ensure that they have any support they may require in making complaints;
- e) Seek to ensure that services are offered and delivered in a culturally appropriate manner;
- f) Seek to ensure that service users are involved in practice and policy development and in the evaluation of services;

## **3.4 Integrity**

### **3.4.1 Value**

Integrity comprises honesty, reliability, openness and impartiality, and is an essential value in the practice of social work.

### **3.4.2 Principles**

Social workers have a duty:

- a) To place service users' needs and interests before their own beliefs, aims, views and advantage, and not to use professional relationships to gain personal, material or financial advantage;
- b) To ensure that their private conduct does not compromise the fulfilment of professional responsibilities, and to avoid behaviour which contravenes professional principles and standards or which damages the profession's integrity;

- c) To be honest and accurate about their qualifications, competence, experience, achievements and affiliations;
- d) To be clear when making public statements whether they are speaking as private individuals or as representatives of the social work profession or of an organisation or group;
- e) To set and enforce explicit and appropriate professional boundaries to minimise the risk of conflict, exploitation or harm in all relationships with current or former service users, research participants, students, supervisees or colleagues;
- f) To avoid any behaviour which may violate professional boundaries, result in unintentional harm or damage the professional relationship;
- g) Not to engage in any form of intimate or sexual conduct with current service users, students, supervisees, research participants, or with others directly involved in a professional relationship which involves an unequal distribution of power or authority in the social worker's favour;
- h) Not to enter into an intimate or sexual relationship with a former service user without careful consideration of any potential for exploitation, taking advice as appropriate.

## **3.5 Competence**

### **3.5.1 Value**

Proficiency in social work practice is an essential value.

### **3.5.2 Principles**

Social workers have a duty to:

- a) Identify, develop, use and disseminate knowledge, theory and skill for social work practice;
- b) Maintain and expand their competence in order to provide quality service and accountable practice, appraising new approaches and methodologies in order to extend their expertise;
- c) Use available supervision or consultation and engage in continuous professional development, taking active steps where necessary to secure appropriate supervision;



- d) Reflect on the nature and source of social problems and on ways of addressing them;
- e) Facilitate and contribute to evaluation and research;
- f) Contribute to the education and training of colleagues and students, sharing knowledge and practice wisdom;
- g) Contribute to the development and implementation of human welfare policies and programmes;
- h) Contribute to promoting culturally appropriate practice and culturally sensitive services;
- i) Recognise the limits of their competence and advise employers and service users when referral to a more appropriate professional is indicated;
- j) Provide service users with information about the benefits and implications of multi-professional working and about their rights in relation to the sharing of information, and, subject to their consent, work to promote their wellbeing by sharing responsibility with other relevant professionals;
- k) Take appropriate action if ill-health or any other factor is likely to interfere with their professional judgement or performance of duty.

## 4. ETHICAL PRACTICE

This section gives guidance on ethical practice, by applying the values and principles set out above to the principal areas of social work practice. It is not intended to be exhaustive or to constitute detailed prescription.

### 4.1 Responsibilities to Service Users

The service user may be an individual, a family or other group or a community.

#### 4.1.1 Priority of service users' interest

Social workers will:

- a) Give priority to maintaining the best interests of service users, with due regard to the interests of others;

- b) In exceptional circumstances where the priority of the service user's interest is outweighed by the need to protect others or by legal requirements, make service users aware that their interests may be overridden;
- c) Seek to safeguard and promote the rights and interests of service users whenever possible;
- d) Endeavour to ensure service users' maximum participation in decisions about their lives when impairment or ill-health require the social worker or another person to act on their behalf;
- e) Not reject service users or lose concern for their suffering, even when obliged to protect themselves or others against them or to acknowledge their inability to help them.

#### **4.1.2 Conflicts of interest**

Social workers will be alert to the possibility of any conflict of interest which may affect their ability to exercise professional discretion or bias their judgement. If such a conflict arises, they will declare it and take appropriate action to ensure the professional relationship is not prejudiced. They will help individuals, families, groups and communities to explore the options for resolving or balancing conflicting or competing needs and interests.

#### **4.1.3 Self-determination by service users**

Social workers will help service users to reach informed decisions about their lives and promote their autonomy, provided that this does not conflict with their safety or with the rights of others. They will endeavour to minimise the use of legal or other compulsion. Any action which diminishes service users' civil or legal rights must be ethically, professionally and legally justifiable.

#### **4.1.4 Informed consent**

Social workers will not act without the informed consent of service users, unless required by law to protect that person or another from risk of serious harm. Where service users' capacity to give informed consent is restricted or absent, social workers will as far as possible ascertain and respect their preferences and wishes and maintain their freedom of decision and action, whether or not another person has powers to make decisions on the service user's behalf. Where the law vests the power of consent in respect of a child in the parent or guardian, this in no way diminishes the social worker's duty

to ascertain and respect the child's wishes and feelings, giving due weight to the child's maturity and understanding.

#### **4.1.5 Services provided under compulsion**

Social workers will:

- a) Assist people using services under compulsion to attain as much autonomy as possible;
- b) Inform them of any limits to their right to refuse services, and will advise them of any requirements to share information about them with others;
- c) Encourage them to participate in decision-making;
- d) Have a duty to acknowledge the impact of their own and their organisation's informal or coercive power on involuntary and potentially involuntary service users. This applies for example when the social worker is monitoring a service user's behaviour and there is a possibility of seeking powers of compulsion.

#### **4.1.6 Cultural awareness**

Social workers will:

- a) Acknowledge the significance of culture in their practice, will recognise the diversity within and among cultures and will recognise the impact of their own ethnic and cultural identity;
- b) Obtain a working knowledge and understanding of service users' ethnic and cultural affiliations and identities, and of the values, beliefs and customs normally associated with them, recognising that the service user's own values and beliefs may differ;
- c) Communicate with users, other than in exceptional circumstances, in a language and by means which they understand, using an independent, qualified interpreter where appropriate.

#### **4.1.7 Privacy, confidentiality and records**

Social workers will:

- a) Respect service users' rights to a relationship of trust, to privacy, reliability and confidentiality and to the responsible use of information obtained from or about them;

- b) Observe the principle that information given for one purpose may not be used for a different purpose without the permission of the informant;
- c) Consult service users about their preferences in respect of the use of information relating to them;
- d) Divulge confidential information only with the consent of the service user or informant, except where there is clear evidence of serious risk to the service user, worker, other persons or the community, or in other circumstances judged exceptional on the basis of professional consideration and consultation, limiting any such breach of confidence to the needs of the situation at the time;
- e) Offer counselling as appropriate throughout the process of a service user's access to records;
- f) Ensure, so far as it is in their power, that records, whether manual or electronic, are stored securely, are protected from unauthorised access, and are not transferred, manually or electronically, to locations where access may not be satisfactorily controlled;
- g) Record information impartially and accurately, recording only relevant matters and specifying the source of information.

The sharing of records across agencies and professions, and within a multi-purpose agency, is subject to ethical requirements in respect of privacy and confidentiality. Service users have a right of access to all information recorded about them, subject only to the preservation of other persons' rights to privacy and confidentiality.

## **4.2 Responsibilities to the profession**

Social workers will in both their private and their professional life avoid any behaviour likely to damage the public image of social work or bring the profession into disrepute.

## **4.3 Responsibilities in the workplace**

Social workers will:

- a) Strive to carry out the stated aims of their employing organisation, provided that they are consistent with this Code of Ethics;
- b) Aim for the best possible standards of service provision and be accountable for their practice;

- c) Use the organisation's resources honestly and only for their intended purpose;
- d) Appropriately challenge, and work to improve, policies, procedures, practices and service provisions which:
  - Are not in the best interests of service users;
  - Are inequitable or unfairly discriminatory; or
  - Are oppressive, disempowering, or culturally inappropriate;
- e) Endeavour, if policies or procedures of employing bodies contravene professional standards, to effect change through consultation, using appropriate organisational channels;
- f) Take all reasonable steps to ensure that employers are aware of the Code of Ethics for Social Work, and advocate conditions and policies which reflect its ethical position;
- g) Uphold the ethical principles and responsibilities of this Code, even though employers' policies or instructions may not be compatible with its provisions, observing the values and principles of this Code when attempting to resolve conflicts between ethical principles and organisational policies and practices;
- h) If engaging in action to improve services or working conditions, be guided by the ethics of the profession;
- i) Challenge and seek to address any actions of colleagues which are racist, sexist or otherwise demonstrate prejudice.
- j) Familiarise themselves with the complaints and whistleblowing procedures of their workplace, with the relevant provisions of the Public Interest Disclosure Act and with BASW procedures for complaints against members, addressing suspected or confirmed professional misconduct, incompetence, unethical behaviour or negligence by a colleague through the appropriate organisational, professional or legal channels.

## **4.4 Responsibilities in particular roles**

### **4.4.1 Management**

In applying the general provisions of the Code, social workers in management will observe the following specific ethical responsibilities.

- a) To work for the acceptance by employers of the values and principles and requirements of the Code.
- b) To eliminate all factors within their control which prohibit or discourage employees' adherence to the Code.
- c) To promote equality policies and practices and advocate for resources to meet service users' needs.
- d) To promote effective teamwork and communication.
- e) To enable the provision of an efficient and accountable social work service, while ensuring as far as possible that staff are not subjected to unreasonable demands and expectations by their employers.
- f) To seek to obtain and maintain adequate staff levels, acceptable working conditions and a safe working environment for staff.
- g) To arrange appropriate professional supervision for social work staff.
- h) To ensure that staff under their direction receive continuing training and professional education and seek adequate resources to meet staff development needs.
- i) To provide or arrange appropriate support and protection for staff in accordance with the Association's staff care policies, and to combat discrimination against whistleblowers.
- j) To treat workers fairly and in accordance with the principles of natural justice.
- k) To promote acceptance of the strengths and benefits for service users of diversity in the staff group.

#### **4.4.2 Education, training, supervision and evaluation**

In applying the general provisions of the Code, social workers engaged in education, training, supervision or evaluation will observe the following specific ethical responsibilities.

- a) Possess and maintain the requisite knowledge, skill and methodology.
- b) Maintain professional relationships in their work which are constructive and non-exploitative.
- c) Foster in social work students and supervisees a knowledge and

understanding of both the social work profession and this Code, emphasising the relevance of this knowledge to their practice.

- d) Inform students of their ethical responsibilities to agencies, supervisors and service users.
- e) Take all reasonable steps to ensure that social work students and social workers under their supervision act in accordance with the principles of this Code.
- f) Adhere to the principles of privacy and confidentiality in the supervisory relationship.
- g) Evaluate the performance of students and supervisees fairly and responsibly.
- h) Recognise that the supervisor's role is educational, supportive, developmental and work-focused. Supervisees who request or require therapy will be referred to another competent practitioner.

#### **4.4.3 Independent practice**

In applying the general provisions of this Code, social workers in independent practice will observe the following specific ethical responsibilities.

- a) To practise only within their areas of competence and offer suitable referral when service users' needs fall outside them.
- b) To arrange, or offer to arrange, appropriate temporary or substitute service for service users when unavailable or unable to continue practice.
- c) To maintain practice records in accordance with the requirements of this Code.
- d) Not to use any position in which they are a paid employee to solicit for independent practice.
- e) To maintain adequate professional indemnity and public liability insurance cover as appropriate, to protect service users.
- f) To advise service users of all fee rates and charges before beginning to provide professional service, and to charge only for hours and services contracted and provided.

#### 4.4.4 Research

In applying the general provisions of this Code, social workers engaged in research will observe the following specific ethical responsibilities.

- a) At all stages of the research process, from inception and resourcing through design and investigation to dissemination, social work researchers have a duty to maintain an active, personal and disciplined ethical awareness and to take practical and moral responsibility for their work.
- b) The aims and process of social work research, including choice of methodology, and the use made of findings, will be congruent with the social work values of respect for human dignity and worth and commitment to social justice. Social work researchers will therefore:
  - Predicate their work on the perspectives and lived experience of the research subject except where this is not appropriate;
  - Seek to ensure that the research in which they are engaged contributes to empowering service users, to promoting their welfare and to improving their access to economic and social resources;
  - Seek to work together with disempowered groups, individuals and communities to devise, articulate and achieve research agendas which respect fundamental human rights and aim towards social justice;
  - Retain a primary concern for the welfare of research subjects and actively protect them from harm, particularly those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or oppressed or have exceptional needs;
  - Consider and set out clearly how they would deal with the ascertainable consequences of proposed research activity for service users, in order to ensure that their legitimate interests are not unwarrantably compromised or prejudiced by the proposed investigation;
  - Not use procedures involving concealment except where no alternative strategy is feasible, where no harm to the research subject can be foreseen and where the greater good is self-evidently served.
- c) In accordance with their duty of competence, social work researchers will, in their chosen methodology and in every other aspect of their research, ensure that they are technically competent to carry out the



particular investigation to a high standard. Where research is carried out primarily as an educational or instructional tool, this responsibility also falls on the student's supervisor.

- d) In accordance with their duty of integrity, social work researchers have a duty to:
- deal openly and fairly with every participant in the research process, including participants, service users, colleagues, funders and employers;
  - inform every participant of all features of the research which might be expected to influence willingness to participate, especially but not exclusively when access to services may be, or be perceived to be, affected by or dependent on participation;
  - in all cases respect participants' absolute right to decline to take part in or to withdraw from the research programme, with special attention to situations in which the researcher is in any way in authority over the participant;
  - ensure that subjects' participation in a programme is based on freely given, informed and acknowledged consent, secured through the use of language or other appropriate means of communication readily comprehensible to the research subject, conveying an adequate explanation of the purpose of the research and the procedures to be followed;
  - seek to exclude from their work any unacknowledged bias;
  - report findings accurately, avoiding distortion whether by omission or otherwise, including any findings which reflect unfavourably on any influential body or research sponsor, on the researcher's own interests or on prevailing wisdom or orthodox opinion;
  - seek to ensure that their findings are not misused or misrepresented;
  - acknowledge when publishing findings the part played by all participants and never take credit for the work of others.
- e) In accordance with their duty of confidentiality, social work researchers will respect and maintain the confidentiality of all data or information produced in the course of their research, except as agreed in advance with participants (including research subjects) or as prescribed by law.

*The Ethics of Social Work: Principles and Standards*, was adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers at its General Meeting in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in July 1994. It consists of two documents, *The International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work*, and *International Ethical Standards for Social Workers*. The International Declaration of Ethical Principles "assumes that both member associations of the IFSW and their constituent members adhere to the principles formulated therein". The British Association of Social Workers, as a member association of the IFSW, subscribes to the principles and standards set out by the IFSW in these documents.

The Code of Ethics of the Australian Association of Social Workers (*AASW Code of Ethics*, accepted at the AASW Annual General Meeting in November 1999), has provided a valuable basis for this revised BASW Code.

Work done by Professor Ian Butler of Keele University and the Theorising Social Work Research group forms the basis of the section on responsibilities in the research setting.

BASW wishes to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Keith Bilton to this revision of the Code of Ethics on behalf of the Association's UK Standards & Ethics Board.

The new Code was launched at the Association's Annual Study Conference on 11th April 2002 in Brighton.