



The Code of Ethics in Social Work

Statement of Principles

Revised Draft – 13/10/11



THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

DRAFT

Date: Revised Draft – 13/10/11

Author: The Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee

Contact: Fran McDonnell, Policy Team

Email: policy@basw.co.uk

The Code of Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction – Scope and objectives | 4 |
| 1 Background | 5 |
| 1.1 Ethics in Social Work | 5 |
| 1.2 Definition of Social Work | 6 |
| 2 Values and Ethical Principles | 7 |
| 2.1 Human Rights | 7 |
| 2.2 Social Justice | 8 |
| 2.3 Professional integrity | 9 |
| 3 Ethical practice principles | 10 |
| Appendix 1 | 15 |
| Appendix 2 | 17 |
| Appendix 3 | 19 |

DRAFT



Introduction – Scope and objectives

The British Association of Social Workers is the professional association for social workers in the United Kingdom (UK). This code of ethics provides a statement of 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 which are necessary for the safeguarding and promotion of the rights of people who use social work services¹.

The Code is binding on all BASW members, in all roles and sectors in the UK. The Association also hopes that it will commend itself to all social workers practising in the UK and to all employers of social workers. Social workers, who are members of BASW, 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.

BASW first adopted a code of ethics in 1975, which 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 incorporated the international statement, *Ethics in Social Work – Statement of Principles* (IFSW and IASSW, 2004) with some revisions². These key documents were reviewed and agreed in 2010 by IFSW and IASSW.

Sections 1 and 2 of this document draw on the background 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 can be put into practice in a UK context.

¹ People who use social work services may be individuals (children, young people or adults), families or other groups or communities

² <http://www.ifsw.org/f38000032.html>

1 Background

1.1 Ethics in Social Work

Ethical awareness is a fundamental part of the professional practice of social workers. Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the services 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. Social work values are embodied in the profession's national and international codes of ethics³. Working definitions of ethics and values are given in Appendix 2.

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 practice⁴.

This is 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. 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.

³ Taken from the IFSW and IASSW (2004 reviewed 2010). The full definition of social work is in Appendix 1

⁴ Some of the practice principles have been taken from Practice Governance Framework Responsibility in Social Work Practice (2011) Changing Lives practice Governance Group & Scottish Government



Ethical problems often arise because social workers:

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

1.2. Definition of Social Work⁵

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 (IFSW and IASSW 2001, reviewed 2010).

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 practice⁶.

⁵ Taken from the IFSW/IASSW definition of social work – the full definition is in Appendix 1

⁶ Taken from the IFSW/IASSW definition of social work – the full definition is in Appendix 1

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)⁷ 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 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.

⁷ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>



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 ethnic and cultural 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 or harmful.

5 Working in solidarity

Social workers, individually and collectively 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 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.

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 must 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 trust, 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 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 service users 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 must only take actions which diminish service users' 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.⁸

Social workers need to acknowledge the impact of their own and the organisations' informal and coercive power on involuntary or potentially involuntary service users, particularly when social workers are monitoring people's behaviour and there is a possibility of seeking powers of compulsion.

4 Providing information

Social workers must give people the information they need to

make informed choices and decisions, including charges and fees for services. They must enable access to all information recorded about the users of services, as they have a right of access subject only to the preservation of other people's rights to privacy and confidentiality. Social worker must also provide information about the right to complain and ensure people have any support they may require in making complaints.

5 Sharing information appropriately

Social workers must ensure the sharing of records 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.

⁸ 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.



7 Empowering people

Social workers should promote policies, procedures and practices which are anti-oppressive and empowering. They must respect people's beliefs, values, culture, goals, needs, preferences, relationships and affiliations. Social workers must 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 are acting in a discriminatory way or demonstrate prejudice.

8 Challenging the abuse of human rights

Social workers must be prepared to challenge discriminatory, ineffective and unjust policies, procedures and practice. They should challenge the abuse of power and excluding 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 must be prepared to report bad practice using existing complaints procedures and if necessary use whistleblowing legislation and guidelines.

10 Maintaining confidentiality

Social workers must 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 with and the circumstances where confidentiality must be waived should be made explicit. Social workers should identify when they have dilemmas about respecting confidentiality and seek support to address these issues.

11 Maintaining clear and accurate records

Social workers must 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 must reflect and critically evaluate their practice and be aware of their impact on others. Social workers must 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 practice⁹

Social workers need to take responsibility for ensuring they have access to professional supervision and discussion which supports them to make sound professional judgements based on good practice. BASW expects 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 development¹⁰

Social workers must 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 by listening to 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 endeavour in seeking changes to policies, procedures, improvements to services or working conditions to be guided by

⁹ See BASW UK Supervision Policy

¹⁰ See BASW Continuing professional Development Policy (CPD) (being developed)



the ethics of the profession. They should engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers to share knowledge and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions.

15 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 collaborate with schools of social work to provide good quality placements and ensure students are informed of their ethical responsibilities to abide by the Code and as far as possible ensure they do.

16 Facilitating and contributing to evaluation and research¹¹

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.

¹¹ Appendix 2 has section on research from original Code

Appendix 1

Definition of Social Work

The international definition of social work was adopted by the IFSW in July 2000 and IASSW in May 2001 and reviewed in 2010.

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 (IFSW and IASSW 2001).

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.

Values:

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 disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate 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.



The Code of Ethics in Social Work Statement of Principles

Theory:

Social work bases its methodology on a systematic body of evidence-based 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-psycho-social 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 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, and socio-economic conditions.

* This international definition of the social work profession replaces the IFSW definition adopted in 1982. It is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive.

Appendix 2

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. For our purpose, '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



The Code of Ethics in Social Work Statement of Principles

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’.

Appendix 3

Research (section from 2002 Code of Ethics produced by Professor Ian Butler, Keele University, and the Theorising Social Work Research Group)

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;



The Code of Ethics in Social Work Statement of Principles

- 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.

DRAFT



THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

The British Association of Social Workers

16 Kent Street
Birmingham B5 6RD

Tel: 0121 622 3911 Fax: 0121 622 4860

**Copies of this document are downloadable at:
www.basw.co.uk**