ASW has been consulting with members and others on a revised Code of Ethics. We have had a very positive response and would like to thank everybody who has participated and taken the time to give us their comments. Overall the revised code has been welcomed, with social workers describing it as “very timely in this current climate of social change” and “a credit to BASW.”

Another member perhaps summed up the purpose of the project most succinctly: “I am very pleased that BASW is reviewing the code... I believe the economic and political context many social workers are practising in gives rise to a lot of conflicts and there is a need for practitioners to be reminded of why they came into the profession.”

All the feedback has been taken into account to produce a final version which will be available on the BASW website on 17 January. Each member will receive a hard copy of the code in the February issue of PSW. This is an important document for all social workers, students and employers and it is binding on all BASW members in the UK.

BASW, as the professional association for social workers in the UK, first adopted a Code of Ethics in 1975. The code has been revised and updated on several occasions, with the existing version developed in 2002. BASW wanted to review the code at this time to ensure that it remains fit for purpose across the UK and can be used and understood by social workers, employers, people who use services and others.

Respondents to the consultation agreed that it is important to emphasise that social
work is an international profession and to incorporate the international statement, Ethics in Social Work – Statement of principles (IFSW/IASSW revised 2010), and the international definition. By doing this it was felt that the code contributes to developing a more well-formed sense of professional identity. The definitions of social work, as well as the values and ethics in the document and appendices were thought to be helpful, particularly for students. Many respondents made the point that ethics is a continuous process that sits at the heart of social work practice.

Among all respondents, 91% said the code is ‘clear and understandable’, and we have considered and acted on detailed comments suggesting changes to wording and emphasis to make the document more succinct and relevant. A clear majority, 84%, said they would be able to apply the professional values and principles to their practice. One stated: “Social workers often work at the interface between the service user and the state and therefore need to be proactive to ensure that the voice of the service user is respected and empowered. The code appears to capture this well.”

On the flip side, one respondent captured some of the difficulties in applying the code to their work. “Although I like the code, I think that social workers are struggling to apply this to their practice, within a resource obsessed system.”

The consultation asked social workers to address human rights or social justice in practice, within a resource obsessed system. “One respondent described the pressure that social workers are dealing with every day and why they need a clear, relevant Code of Ethics that is also accepted and understood by employers.

Conflicts

Respondents described how there is sometimes a conflict between the demands of an employer and what social workers feel is best practice. For example, as one social worker told us, “the pressure to ‘turn over’ a certain amount of cases versus your perspective of the time a case needs”. This is increased in times of diminishing resources and can lead to clashes between professional values and human rights issues and the policies/processes of the organisation.

One respondent described the pressure that this creates, “Trying to uphold all duties with such high caseloads, trying to uphold all duties with no desk, trying to uphold all duties with little supervision. Working late and early to meet deadlines for court and conference reports, getting tired and afraid of criticism if you do not achieve all these high number of tasks.”

“What Social Workers Told BASW About the Code

- “Trying to uphold all duties with such high caseloads, trying to uphold all duties with no desk, trying to uphold all duties with little supervision. Working late and early to meet deadlines for court and conference reports, getting tired and afraid of criticism if you do not achieve all these high number of tasks.”
- “Although I like the code, I think that social workers are struggling to apply this to their practice, within a resource obsessed system.”
- “Social workers often work at the interface between the service user and the state and therefore need to be proactive to ensure that the voice of the service user is respected and empowered. The code appears to capture this well.”
- “I am very pleased that BASW is reviewing the code ..., I believe the economic and political context many social workers are practising in gives rise to a lot of conflicts and there is a need for practitioners to be reminded of why they came into the profession.”

There can be a conflict between the demands of an employer and what social workers feel is best practice. ‘The pressure to ‘turn over’ a certain amount of cases versus your perspective of the time a case needs’.

The Code of Ethics will be inserted into February’s issue of PSW and will be available online from 17 January by visiting www.basw.co.uk/codeofethics