



# The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work

---

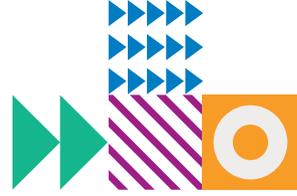


**BASW**

The professional association for  
social work and social workers

# Contents

---



Scope and objectives .....	3
1. Background .....	4
1.1 Ethics in social work .....	4
1.2 The international definition of social work (2014) .....	4
2. Values and ethical principles .....	6
2.1 Human rights .....	6
2.2 Social justice .....	7
2.3 Professional integrity .....	8
3. Guidance on practising ethically as a social worker .....	9
Appendix: Some working definitions of key terms .....	13

Join BASW today at  
[basw.co.uk/membership](https://basw.co.uk/membership)

Scan the QR code below  
to start your journey





## Scope and objectives

**The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work and 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 act ethically and have the professional rights necessary to protect and promote the rights of people who need to or who access social work services. Social workers provide services for and with individuals (children, young people and adults), families, groups and communities.

Social workers support people to meet their needs and to protect them from harm; they collaborate with family members, friends and others who are also trying to provide support; and sometimes they have to engage with people who have been assessed as posing a risk to others.

All social workers must abide by the conditions of registration that apply in their own countries. While registration allows social workers to practise, the BASW Code of Ethics summarises the values and aspirations which BASW believes should characterise social work in the UK.

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 one another, to their employers, to colleagues in other disciplines and to society. The Association commends and promotes the Code of Ethics to all social workers, educators, researchers and employers of social workers in the UK.

The Code also applies to any events that are organised by BASW members. All participation in BASW events, whether by BASW members or others, must conform to the Code of Ethics. Guidance is available for BASW members on how to ensure that participants understand these requirements.

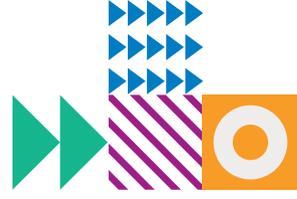
BASW's Code of Ethics first adopted in 1975, has been revised and updated on several occasions. The Code of Ethics was updated in 2014 to include the revised international definition of social work:

[www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work](http://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work)

This current revision incorporates the Global Social Work: Statement of Ethical Principles, agreed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2018:

[www.ifsw.org/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles](http://www.ifsw.org/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles)





# 1. Background

---

## 1.1 Ethics in social work

---

**Social workers’ ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to people 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 disadvantaged, 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 is not designed to provide a detailed set of rules about how social workers should act in specific situations. Instead it comprises statements of values and ethical principles relating to human rights, social justice and professional integrity, together with guidance on practising ethically as a social worker.

## 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](http://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work)



In its various forms, social work addresses the multiple, complex interactions between human beings, their social situation and their environment. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and safeguard people who may be at risk of harm. Social workers work in partnership with others to find solutions and achieve positive change. As such, social workers are change agents in social and civil society as well as in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve.

### **Theory:**

Social work is evidence-informed including local and indigenous knowledge specific to its context. It recognises the complexity of interactions between human beings, their social situation and their environment. 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 aims to address 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 interventions (including statutory

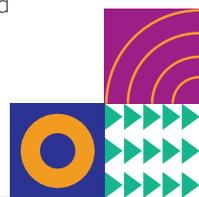
interventions), but always consistently with its holistic focus on people and their social circumstances.

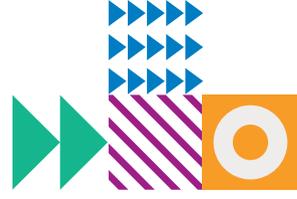
Social work activity ranges from psychosocial approaches such as clinical social work, group work, social pedagogical work, therapeutic work with families, to involvement in social policy, education, research, commissioning, service development and service improvement.

Interventions also include organisational 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 depending on cultural, historical, legal and socio-economic diversity. Everything that social workers do, whether as individual practitioners, managers, commissioners, policy makers or in other social work roles, is underpinned by the profession's ethics and values.

Social work in the UK in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive.





## 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), other related UN declarations and the European Convention on Human 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 rights 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. Social workers ensure that any limitations on a person's rights are necessary and proportionate and are for a legitimate purpose.

##### **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 Working holistically**

Social workers should be concerned with the whole person, recognising the biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of people's lives. They should seek to engage with the person and their wider social systems such as family, community, societal and natural environments.

##### **5 Identifying and developing strengths**

Social workers should focus on the capacity and strengths of all individuals, groups and communities and thus aim to challenge stigma and promote 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 oppression**

Social workers have a responsibility to challenge oppression on any basis, including (but not limited to) age, capacity, civil status, class, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, gender identity, language, nationality (or lack of), political beliefs, poverty, race, relationship status, religion, sex, sexual orientation or spiritual beliefs.

#### **2 Respecting diversity**

Social workers should recognise and respect the diversity of the communities in which they practise, taking into account individual, family, group and community differences. Social workers should identify and question their own prejudices and consider how these could be experienced as oppressive by the people with whom they are working. Social workers should demonstrate a clear commitment to anti-oppressive practice such as pro-active anti-racism and promoting the rights of all people experiencing discrimination, structural inequality and marginalisation.

#### **3 Distributing resources**

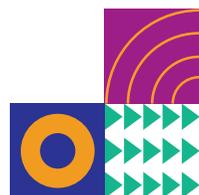
Social workers should advocate for access to, and equitable distribution of, resources.

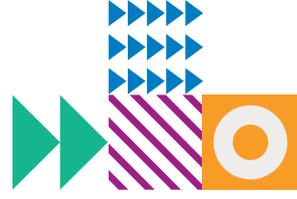
#### **4 Challenging unjust policies and practices**

Social workers are expected to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate, and/or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, discriminatory or otherwise 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 oppression, social exclusion, stigma 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 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. They should clearly explain their roles, interventions and decisions. They should not seek to deceive or manipulate people who use their services, their colleagues or employers.

#### **3 Maintaining professional boundaries**

Social workers should not abuse their position for personal benefit or gratification, financial gain, or for any reason. This applies to people who use their services, colleagues and employers.

#### **4 Making considered professional judgements**

Social workers should make judgements based on balanced and considered reasoning. They should maintain awareness of the impact of their own values, prejudices and conflicts of interest on their practice. These judgments should be made in partnership with the people who will be affected. Social workers should be aware of the impact of their presence can have on people who use social work services and their relationships with others.

#### **5 Being transparent and 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, in terms that are comprehensible to the people concerned.

Social workers should call attention to any situations in which they are being asked to put themselves at unacceptable levels of risk.



### 3. Guidance on practising ethically as a social worker

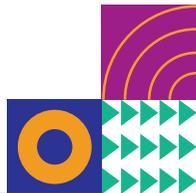
---

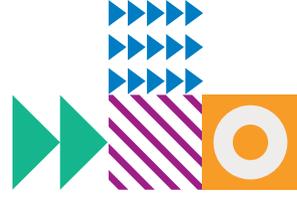
**The ethical practice principles apply across the UK, but they are not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive. There will be variations in interpretation and guidance in the different countries. Social workers should ensure their practice reflects appropriate codes of practice, legislation, governance frameworks, professional practice and training and regulatory 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 ensure social workers can comply with the Code of Ethics and other requirements to deliver safe and effective practice.

If a BASW member believes that they are being asked to practise in a way that is inconsistent with this Code of Ethics, or that there may be a conflict between the Code and their registration requirements, they should seek support from BASW's Advice and Representation service.

The following guidance is intended to illustrate how social workers can follow the ethical values and principles in section 2, whilst acting with integrity and treating people with compassion, empathy and care.





### 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 with public bodies and other agencies. They should value and respect the contribution of colleagues from other disciplines whilst being prepared to offer constructive challenge when necessary.

### 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 that interfere with 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 each individual's mental capacity to make his or her own decisions, according to the relevant legal framework.

When working with individuals who lack the capacity to make certain decisions, social workers should draw on the relevant legal frameworks to respect the individual's preferences and wishes and ensure that they are appropriately involved when decisions are made on their 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 to people affected by social work decisions

Social workers should ensure people have 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 seeking other remedies.



## 5 Sharing information appropriately

Social workers should make decisions about sharing information legally and ethically. They should ensure that they protect privacy and confidentiality across agencies and professions but also that they share information professionally where it is necessary and required by law.

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.

Social workers should recognise that the use of digital technology and social media may impact on ethical practice, including privacy, confidentiality and conflicts of interest. Social workers need to take steps to ensure they have the appropriate knowledge of technology to protect themselves and the people they are working with.

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

## 7 Empowering people

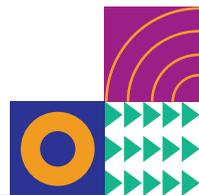
Social workers should promote and contribute to the development of co-produced policies, procedures and practices that are anti-oppressive and empowering. They should seek to understand people's beliefs, values, culture, goals, needs, preferences, relationships and affiliations but be prepared to offer respectful challenge when necessary.

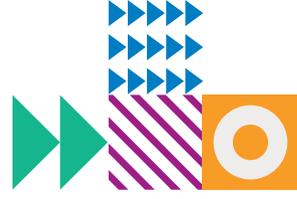
Social workers should recognise their own prejudices, ensuring that they do not oppress any person or group. They should ensure that services are offered and delivered in ways that are appropriate for the people who will use them.

## 8 Challenging the abuse of human rights

Social workers should be prepared to challenge oppressive, 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 strive to protect human rights and ensure their skills are not used for inhumane purposes. They should challenge and seek to address any actions of colleagues who demonstrate oppressive practice or prejudice.





## 9 Being prepared to whistleblow

Social workers must report situations where they have significant unresolved ethical dilemmas, using all available channels including complaints procedures. If necessary social workers should be prepared to use public interest disclosure legislation and whistleblowing guidelines.

## 10 Maintaining clear and accurate records

Social workers should maintain impartial and accurate records and clear evidence to support professional judgements. They should record only relevant matters, specify the source of information, distinguish between fact and opinion, and be prepared to be accountable for their record keeping.

## 11 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 in supervision to ensure they work in a safe and effective manner.

## 12 Using professional supervision and peer support to reflect on and improve practice

Social workers should take responsibility for seeking access to professional supervision and discussion which will support 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.

## 13 Taking responsibility for their own practice and continuing professional development

Social workers should develop and maintain their continuing professional development (CPD) in order to provide quality services and be accountable for their practice. They need to keep up to date with relevant research, learning from other professionals and service users. BASW expects registered social workers to meet the CPD requirements of their regulator. If there is a conflict between this and the UK Code of Ethics, this should be brought to the attention of BASW.



**14 Contributing to the continuous improvement of professional practice**

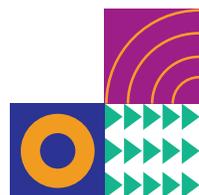
Social workers should strive to create conditions in employing agencies, in communities of practice and professional forums where the principles of the Code are discussed, evaluated and upheld in practice. They should engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers to share knowledge and take collegiate responsibility for making ethically informed decisions. They should actively endeavour and participate in seeking improvements to services or working conditions as guided by the ethics of the profession.

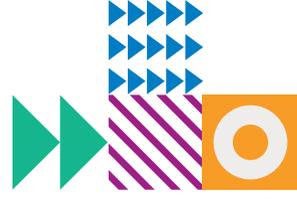
**15 Taking responsibility for the professional development of others**

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 contribute to social work education, including the provision of good quality placements for qualifying and post-qualifying education and ensure all social workers in their pre/post qualification studies are informed of their ethical responsibility to use the Code in their practice.

**16 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 services. They should find ways to enquire in their own work and explore ways of analysing and evaluating the quality, outcomes and impact of their practice with people who use social work services.





# Appendix: Some working definitions of key terms

(adapted from Banks, S (2021) *Ethics and Values in Social Work, 5th Edition*. London: Red Globe Press, BASW 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: ‘upholding and promoting human dignity and well-being.’

***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 people using services’). So, for example, ‘social workers should respect people’s self-determination’ is an ethical principle; whereas ‘social workers should respect the rights of people using services to consult their files’ 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’.

**Note: BASW provides additional amplification of the Code of Ethics for a range of practice situations including social media, human rights and anti-poverty practice. Please refer to the BASW website for these and other related guidance.**

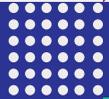




# BASW

The professional association for  
social work and social workers

[www.basw.co.uk](http://www.basw.co.uk)



## Copyright © British Association of Social Workers

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form without the written permission of the copyright owner.

You may quote short excerpts from this document in books, journal articles, academic theses or essays provided the source is fully and correctly cited.

**To cite this document:** BASW (2021) The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work. Birmingham: BASW

