

Draft AASW Practice Standards April 2022

INTRODUCTION

The AASW Practice Standards (The Standards) identify the minimum requirements of social workers in Australia considered acceptable by the AASW for effective, professional and accountable social work practice. They describe how social workers apply their expert knowledge, understandings and skills to ensure service users experience a level of quality that results in the best possible processes and outcomes. The Standards are intended to be relevant to all social workers, irrespective of practice, context, or years of experience.

The AASW Code of Ethics (The Code) provides the foundation for The Standards. The Code describes who social workers are and what they do. The Standards describe how social workers are expected to meet the minimum requirements set by the profession for acceptable practice. They also inform the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) which regulate and guide curriculum development for social work programs in Australia. Graduates from AASW accredited programs are eligible for membership of the AASW as per the AASW's Constitution and membership eligibility criteria.

The Standards enable social workers to demonstrate their professional identity through their practice, and ensure trust and confidence in the profession for the public and service users. The Standards provide a reference point for assuring the quality of practice and hold social workers to account to the people¹ they serve. They also crystallise the core elements of practice for social workers and for those who use their services, including policy-makers, employers, and other professionals working in related sectors.

The Standards provide the foundation for current and future practice guidelines, accreditation criteria, credentialling, capability statements, and related documents developed for education, professional development, specialist practice settings and professional interest groups.

¹ The Practice Standards has adopted the International Federation of Social Workers 2014 definition of the term 'people' for use throughout this document. The term 'people' is understood to mean 'individuals, families and other kinship arrangements, groups, communities, organisations and societies with whom social workers work'.

AASW Practice Standards 2022

- Standard 1: Social workers conduct themselves according to the values, principles and guidelines of the AASW Code of Ethics 2020.
- Standard 2: Social workers practice in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the spirit of self-determination as agents of change, advancement and healing.
- Standard 3: Social workers advocate for policy initiatives and approaches to practice aimed at achieving fair and equitable access for people to social, health, economic, environmental and political resources.
- Standard 4: Social workers practice respectfully and inclusively with regard to culture and diversity.
- Standard 5: Social workers practice within a professional knowledge framework informed by a critical understanding of contemporary social work theory and research.
- Standard 6: Social workers make professional decisions on the basis of a holistic assessment of the needs, strengths, goals and preferences of people.
- Standard 7: Social workers actively contribute to strengthening and promoting the identity and standing of the profession.
- Standard 8: Social workers strengthen and build their practice through critical reflection, mentoring support and constructive feedback from senior social workers and colleagues.
- Standard 9: Social workers monitor their skills, knowledge and expertise to maintain, improve and broaden their professional development.

1. The Code of Ethics

The AASW *Code of Ethics* (The *Code*) expresses the principles and responsibilities that are integral to, and characterise, the social work profession. Whereas The Code clarifies expectations of the social work profession in relation to appropriate conduct, the Practice Standards describe how social workers work in ways that ensure their practice is conducted in an ethical way. Standard 1 specifies key elements that are integral to how social workers demonstrate, in practical terms, the core values central to their professional identity.

Standard 1: Social workers conduct themselves according to the values, principles and guidelines of the AASW Code of Ethics 2020.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 1**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. be accountable for the quality of their practice, the decisions they make and their professional actions
2. acknowledge and accept responsibility for what is within their power, control or management
3. ensure service users are made aware of the AASW Code of Ethics and the organisational and professional complaints mechanisms available to them
4. clearly articulate the ethics underpinning their approach to decisions and actions
5. seek advice from supervisors or senior colleagues where ethical issues are unresolved or create potential risks for the parties involved.

2. Working alongside Australian First Nations peoples

Social workers acknowledge the learnings, strengths, capacities, abilities and contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to wider society as an integral part of social work knowledge and practice. Standard 2 identifies the minimum requirements required of social workers in their practice that demonstrate their commitment to working alongside First Nations peoples recognising and supporting their rights and self-determination.

Standard 2: Social workers practice in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the spirit of self-determination as agents of change, advancement and healing.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 2**, in working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, social workers will, at a minimum:

1. demonstrate respect for their knowledge and lived experiences, and privilege their voices
2. draw upon the knowledge, experience, and wisdom of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to guide approaches to practice
3. follow established cultural and communication protocols in each and every engagement
4. recognise the impact of colonisation and institutionalised racism
5. demonstrate awareness of how the power of social workers may be perceived
6. value the life stories and connections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
7. advocate for the significance of connection with land and country, and commitment to safeguarding the physical environment
8. support action to identify and address inadequacies and gaps to services across all levels of support, prevention, and intervention.

3. Human rights and social justice

The AASW holds that social justice is a core principle that its members are obliged to promote and uphold for society in general and for the people with whom they work. Standard 3 sets out how social workers practice in ways that uphold human rights and that seek to provide access, equity, participation and legal protection for all.

Standard 3: Social workers advocate for policy initiatives and approaches to practice aimed at achieving fair and equitable access for people to social, health, economic, environmental and political resources.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 3**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. ensure that the rights of the people they work with are protected
2. provide leadership and advocacy for policy and practice aimed at achieving a fair and equitable allocation of social resources
3. support action to enable people to live a life free of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence
4. advocate for measures that address the inequitable impact of climate and other environmental factors on the health and wellbeing of people
5. challenge policies and practices that are oppressive and fail to meet international standards of environmental sustainability, human rights, social inclusion and social development
6. promote public policy initiatives aimed at eliminating structural and systemic inequities experienced by people.

4. Culture, identities and intersectionality

Social workers apply an intersectional perspective to the complexities around culture and diverse identities in society. That is, they practice with a clear and critical understanding of the ways in which different aspects of a person's social and political identities can expose them to the overlapping and compounding effects of discrimination, stigma and power imbalances.

Standard 4: Social workers practice respectfully and inclusively with regard to culture and diversity.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 4**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. apply an intersectional lens in their approach to complexities around culture and diversity
2. respectfully engage with people who have culturally diverse identities
3. adapt and modify their practice on the basis of a critical awareness of how their personal values, cultures and beliefs impact on their interactions with people
4. consult with relevant community members to inform their assessment and case management of people with diverse identities and backgrounds
5. advocate for organisational policies and processes that aim to counter the effects of overlapping forms of discrimination, stigma and power imbalances in service delivery
6. practise from a culturally safe framework and promote appropriate organisational policies and practice.

5. Critical thinking in practice

Social workers apply critical thinking to their professional knowledge and actions. As reflective practitioners their approach is based on a critical assessment of the possibilities and limits of social work theory and research in policy and practice.

Standard 5. Social workers practice within a professional knowledge framework informed by a critical understanding of contemporary social work theory and research.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 5**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. develop and work from a clearly articulated practice framework
2. adopt or adapt innovations in practice on the basis of a critical assessment of evidence, and the needs, preferences and changing contexts of service users
3. modify their approaches in the light of new and emerging global social, health, political, economic and environmental challenges and knowledge
4. contribute their critical perspectives in interactions with other professions in a positive and constructive manner
5. practice within the limits of their professional scope, knowledge and skills and, where necessary, direct people to alternative sources of professional advice.

6. Exercising professional judgement

Social workers operate at the interface between people and their social, cultural and physical environments. They make professional judgements in addressing issues and challenges at all levels of practice, from policy development and administration to working with communities, groups and individuals. In applying their expertise to social and personal difficulties of service users, social workers provide a sound, evidence-based rationale to support their decisions.

Standard 6: Social workers make professional decisions on the basis of a holistic assessment of the needs, strengths, goals and preferences of people.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 6**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. recognise, and use responsibly, the power and authority they have when exercising professional judgement affecting people
2. recognise and respect the exercise of autonomy and differences there may be in professional perspectives and decision-making
3. critically assess the quality and veracity of all relevant information to support their decisions
4. make decisions based solely on achieving the best possible outcomes for people
5. assess the nature and level of risk to people, if any, and incorporate that into the overall assessment
6. make assessments and decide courses of action informed by the lived experience, wishes and preferences of people to the fullest extent possible
7. ensure their decisions are contextualised with respect to the impact of intersectional factors
8. consult with other professionals contributing to the wellbeing of the people they serve.

7. Professional identity

The strength of social workers' sense of professional identity is central to maintaining the integrity and status of the practice standards. As one of the most trusted professions in Australia social workers have established a distinctive professional identity as respected advocates and practitioners on key social issues at many levels across policy and practice. They act collectively, as well as individually, to achieve a common purpose of social justice and human rights, inclusion and wellbeing for people

Standard 7: Social workers actively contribute to strengthening and promoting the identity and standing of the profession.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 7**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. promote the unique scope and contribution of social work to the people they serve, including within interdisciplinary settings
2. treat colleagues and all who contribute to the well-being of service users with courtesy and demonstrate respect for their individual expertise
3. encourage and celebrate excellence in social work practice and contributions to the standing of the profession
4. work to advance professional knowledge through research, evaluation, education, consultation and sharing good practice
5. advocate for the provision of best practice professional development and supervision for current and future colleagues
6. contribute to building a diverse and highly competent workforce and respected profession.

8. Professional supervision

Supervision is an ongoing activity of social workers and central to their professional identity and growth across all roles and organisational settings. Structured supervision is an educative and supportive process focused on critical reflection, application in the practice area, and accountability in which all social workers are engaged throughout the duration of their careers.

Standard 8: Social workers strengthen and build their practice through critical reflection, mentoring support and constructive feedback from senior social workers and colleagues.

What this means in practice:

To meet **Standard 8**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. arrange formal supervision relevant to their area of practice, and congruent with social work values and ethics, led by appropriately trained, social work qualified supervisors or peers.
2. maintain a record of supervision for the duration of the supervisory relationship
3. ensure there is a clear focus in supervisory relationships on strengthening professional identity and practice, separate and distinct from line management roles
4. balance their attention to the three functions of supervision — education, support and accountability
5. use supervision to examine and critically reflect upon their personal and professional values and the implications for practice
6. use supervision to demonstrate integration of professional knowledge and theoretical approaches to practice.

9. Professional growth

Social workers are committed to maintaining and improving their practice standards through professional development. Professional growth is an ongoing process informed by the changing practice environment, new perspectives and strategies in professional domains, and changes in community expectations and outlooks.

Standard 9: Social workers monitor their skills, knowledge and expertise to maintain, improve and broaden their professional development.

What this means in practice

To meet **Standard 9**, Social workers will, at a minimum:

1. regularly evaluate and review the quality of their approach to work against the practice standards
2. systematically identify their current and future professional learning needs
3. address these needs through education, training, consultation, supervision, mentoring and similar forms of support
4. seek out new knowledge, research and evidence to inform their practice
5. share advice, expertise and new developments with colleagues
6. demonstrate evidence of their learning experiences as the basis for ongoing reflective practice.