

# AASW Practice Standards

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# Preamble

## **Our vision**

Wellbeing and social justice for all.

*AASW Strategic Plan 2021–2024*

## **Our purpose**

Supporting social workers and empowering the profession to make a positive difference.

*AASW Strategic Plan 2021–2024*

## **Our commitment to reconciliation**

The AASW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, their families and communities, the First Australians, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share, and pays respect to their unique values and their continuing and enduring cultures that deepen and enrich the life of our nation and communities.

*AASW Code of Ethics 2020*

The Australian Association of Social Workers' vision for Reconciliation is one where all Australians hear and learn the truth of our past, act in the present to progress a just society which represents all of us.

To achieve this vision, the AASW commits to elevating and amplifying the voices, cultures and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to foster a better, fairer society led by our values of caring for everyone.

*Reconciliation Action Plan November 2022–2024*

# Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers (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 2020 (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 approach their work in ways that meet the minimum expectations 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.

Social workers operate across a diverse range of contexts, for example: working directly with individuals, families, groups and communities; conducting research and evaluation; providing education and training for future and current social workers; leading and managing public and private organisations; and contributing to policy development and implementation.

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. They provide a reference point for assuring the quality of practice and make social workers accountable to the people<sup>1</sup> 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 basis 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.

## AASW Practice Standards 2023

<b>STANDARD 1</b>	Social workers conduct themselves according to the values, principles and guidelines of the AASW Code of Ethics 2020.
<b>STANDARD 2</b>	Social workers practice in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to support their priorities and aspirations.
<b>STANDARD 3</b>	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.
<b>STANDARD 4</b>	Social workers practice respectfully and inclusively with regard to culture and diversity.
<b>STANDARD 5</b>	Social workers practice within a professional knowledge framework informed by a critical understanding of contemporary social work theory and research.
<b>STANDARD 6</b>	Social workers make professional decisions on the basis of a holistic assessment of the needs, strengths, goals and preferences of people.
<b>STANDARD 7</b>	Social workers actively contribute to strengthening and promoting the identity and standing of the profession.
<b>STANDARD 8</b>	Social workers build and strengthen their practice through regular structured supervision from social work qualified supervisors.
<b>STANDARD 9</b>	Social workers monitor their skills, knowledge, and expertise to maintain, improve and broaden their professional development.

# 1 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. The Code describes **who** social workers are and **what** they do. The Standards describe **how** social workers ensure their practice is conducted in an ethical way.

## 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.

# Working alongside 2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, recognising and supporting their rights and self-determination.

## STANDARD 2

Social workers practice in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to support their priorities and aspirations.

### 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 awareness of the diversity among, and differences between, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures throughout Australia
2. demonstrate respect for the knowledge and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and privilege their voices
3. recognise and draw upon the cultural knowledge, experience, and wisdom provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to guide approaches to practice
4. follow appropriate cultural and communication protocols in each and every engagement
5. recognise the impact of colonisation, institutionalised racism and how the history and power of social workers as part of the system may be perceived and experienced
6. advocate for the significance of connection with land and Country, and commitment to safeguarding the physical, ecological and spiritual environments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
7. support action to identify and address inadequacies and gaps to services across all levels of support, prevention, and intervention
8. advocate for the removal or prevention of social policies and programs that serve to impede the right to be self-determining.



# 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 promoted, protected, and upheld
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, identity 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 work with and for people from 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 framework for reflective practice
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. practise 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 people. In applying their expertise to the 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 by service users and professional practitioners and the 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 aimed primarily at achieving the best possible outcomes for people
5. assess the nature and level of risk to people and incorporate that into the overall assessment
6. make assessments and decide courses of action informed and guided by the lived experience, wishes and preferences of service users to the fullest extent possible
7. ensure their decisions are contextualised with respect to the impact of intersectional factors
8. consult with other professional practitioners who are contributing to the wellbeing of the people they serve or work with.

# 7 Professional identity

The strength of social workers' sense of professional identity is central to maintaining the integrity and status of the Standards. As part of recognising the diversity of social work practice in Australia, central elements of professional identity include the integration of self, professional knowledge, values and skills as part of an ongoing commitment to the social work profession. As one of the most trusted professions in Australia, social workers have established a distinctive professional identity of being respected advocates and practitioners on key social issues at many levels across policy and practice. They act collectively, as well as individually, to bring esteem to the profession through 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. encourage and celebrate excellence in social work practice and in contributions to the standing of the profession
2. promote the unique scope and contribution of social work to the people they serve, including within interdisciplinary settings
3. treat colleagues and all who contribute to the wellbeing of service users with courtesy, and demonstrate respect for their individual expertise
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 focused primarily on four functions: professional growth in the practice area; critical analysis; professional and personal support; and accountability in the provision of services, management, and administration.

## **STANDARD 8**

Social workers build and strengthen their practice through regular structured supervision from social work qualified supervisors.

### What this means in practice

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

1. undertake formal supervision, relevant to their area of practice, by an appropriately trained, senior social work qualified supervisor
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 monitor, evaluate and review their skills, knowledge and expertise to maintain, improve and broaden their professional development
2. sustain, deepen and broaden their skills, knowledge and practice expertise for continued professional development
3. systematically identify their current and future professional learning needs
4. address these needs through education, training, consultation, supervision, mentoring and similar forms of support
5. be active learners, open to new and emerging knowledge, research and evidence informing their practice
6. share advice, expertise and new developments with colleagues
7. demonstrate evidence of their learning experiences as the basis for ongoing reflective practice.

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