



# Standards for Social Work Education

## Pre- and post-qualifying consultation

### 2025

We are consulting on pre and post-qualifying standards for social work education. The standards will form part of the updated and expanded Framework for Social Work Education to be published in 2026.

We aim to create a clear set of standards that reflect the professional identity of the social work profession and the unique contribution of social work from starting as a student to strategic manager level. This will form part of the updated Framework for Social Work Education and will be the foundation for professional pathways.

The consultation is in two parts:

**Part 1 - Reviewing the Standards in Social Work Education.**

**Part 2 - Developing post qualifying standards for social work.**

The consultation closes at 5pm on Monday 8 September 2025.

\* Required

Any responses you provide in this survey will be treated confidentially and stored online while it is open.

When it is closed, the data will be moved to our secure IT system. Any reporting of the data will not identify individual services. We will hold the data for up to five years then delete it. The results may be released under a Freedom of Information request.

If you choose to leave personal information, for example as part of a free-text response, the legal basis for the SSSC holding this information is consent, which you may withdraw at any time by contacting [performanceandimprovement@sssc.uk.com](mailto:performanceandimprovement@sssc.uk.com)

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If you would like to request this survey in another format please contact us on 0345 60 30 891.

**1. I confirm that I have read and understand the privacy information above and agree to any personal data I provide being used in the way set out. \***

Yes

No

## About you

2. Are you responding as a:

- Person accessing services or carer
- Student
- Registered Social Worker
- Practice Educator
- Employer
- Academic / Lecturer
- On behalf of an organisation

## About you

3. What organisation do you work for?

Scottish Association of Social Work

## About you

4. What sector do you work in?

- Statutory services
- Third sector
- Independent Sector
- Higher / Further Education

# Language

## Part 1

### Reviewing the Standards in Social Work Education

The Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) were revised and published in 2019. We want to make sure they remain relevant to social work education and practice. We also want to make sure that the language within the standards is consistent, inclusive and trauma informed.

The Standards in Social Work Education 2019 can be reviewed at this link: [Standards in Social Work Education and Ethical Principles 2019](#)

5. We want to reflect how people who access services want to be described within the standards. This involved the SSSC Codes of Practice refresh agreed on the term people. We are interested in your preference.

Please select one option from the following:

- People
- Individuals
- Service users
- People accessing services
- People with lived experience
-

6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neither agree nor disagree      Agree      Strongly agree

Where appropriate we should replace inter-relationship with intersectionality to better reflect our understanding of how social categories can interconnect with experiences of discrimination, privilege and oppression.

                      

We should replace 'monitor' as appropriate with terms such as support/ facilitate/ enable/ intervene or reassess.

## 7. Do you have any other suggestions about the language used in the SiSWE?

The language used in SiSWE should be plain, inclusive, and jargon-free, making it accessible to people from varied educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

The Standards in Social Work Education (SISWE) are often too convoluted and can even require 'translating' for everybody to understand them. The SiSWE should be accessible for everyone, particularly if we want to attract a more diverse future generation of social workers. The language needs to be consistent throughout a social work career and applicable for social work students to NQSWs and experienced social workers. It would be good if they would give the feel of one cohesive framework for social work rather than lots of individual bits to promote clarity, coherence, and continuity in professional development.

A more streamlined and unified framework would help social workers see their development as a continuum, rather than navigating fragmented standards at different stages. Such an approach would not only enhance clarity but also foster a stronger sense of professional identity and progression.

We don't agree with the replacement of inter-relationship to be intersectionality. Intersectionality is a valuable concept in understanding how multiple aspects of identity (e.g., race, gender, class) interact to shape experiences.

However, it is a complex academic term that may not be easily understood by students or practitioners without a strong theoretical background.

Simply swapping terms doesn't guarantee better understanding. Instead, the framework should explain and contextualise these concepts in practical, relatable ways.

Intersectionality is a very complex term which is often not fully understood and therefore won't make the standard clearer to students. However, we agree that highlighting the multi-faceted nature of people's lives and identities and how they are impacted by compounding factors is very important which we think won't be achieved by simply replacing one term with another.

A sweeping agreement about replacing the word 'monitor' with those other suggestions is

## Clarity and structure

8. Do you think the ethical principles which underpin the SiSWE should be made more prominent in the updated version?

Yes

No

## Clarity and structure

9. If yes, how could this be achieved?

The ethical principles should get a more prominent position right at the beginning. However, social work ethics and values also need to be woven through the whole framework. Consequently, we would recommend for them not to sit separately.

Having them at the end makes them seem like an afterthought and prevent them from getting the attention required.

The connection to human rights should be explicit and at the centre of the standards.

Ethical expectations and legal requirements are not the same and the distinction between

## Clarity and structure

10. Do you think that the standards ensure that people are recognised as experts by experience within a social work role?

Yes

No

## Clarity and structure

## 11. If no, what can be improved?

We are concerned that the current standards do not adequately ensure that individuals are recognised as experts by experience. For example, the terminology used, such as “people receiving services”, portrays individuals as passive recipients rather than active partners. This language undermines the principles of collaboration and co-production and stands in contrast to the vision of “empowered individuals with choice and control over their own care and support” as set out in the Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013.

To realise this vision, relationships must be placed at the heart of the standards. However, the statutory systems within which social workers operate have become increasingly transactional and process driven. The standards appear to reflect and reinforce these systems, rather than challenge them or promote a more person-centred, relational approach. We would welcome a shift in focus towards standards that serve people, not systems.

In adult services in particular, social work has become synonymous with care management, with practitioners often referred to, or referring to themselves, as “care managers.” This shift highlights the need to move away from transactional models towards relational practice, which should be actively promoted and supported by the standards.

We also note that the structure and phrasing of the consultation questions reflect a transactional mindset, often implying a “doing to” approach rather than “working alongside.” While relationships are acknowledged in the current standards, they are expected to be fostered within a system that does not always support them and often actively appears to diminish or undermine positive relationships.

We acknowledge the reality that decisions are increasingly driven by resource constraints

## Clarity and structure

### 12. Do you think that the standards are clear?

For example, is there a shared understanding that ‘across the lifespan’ includes from pre-birth and into bereavement?

Yes

No



## Clarity and structure

13. If no, what can be improved?

We feel that this question may be misdirected in its focus. As outlined in our response to Question 1, the current standards convey a tone that feels distant and impersonal, and do not sufficiently reflect the core values that underpin social work practice.

Before addressing specific details, such as whether the phrase "across the life span" is sufficiently clear, we believe it is essential to first establish a strong foundational framework that genuinely reflects the principles of relationship-based, person-centred practice. Once that foundation is in place, more detailed considerations can be meaningfully explored.

## Clarity and structure

14. Do you think that the standards specific are enough?

For example, is there a shared understanding of words such as sufficient and meaningful?

Yes

No

## Clarity and structure

## 15. If no, what can be improved?

We believe the standards should offer greater clarity regarding the role of social workers. In recent years, tasks traditionally carried out by qualified social workers have increasingly been delegated to social work assistants, creating ambiguity around professional boundaries and responsibilities.

This lack of clarity is further compounded by inconsistencies across local authorities, where expectations of social workers and other professionals can vary significantly. Such variation undermines a coherent understanding of the profession and its scope.

We would welcome the inclusion of clearer guidance within the standards to help establish consistency in roles and responsibilities across Scotland, ensuring that the profession is both

## Clarity and structure

### 16. Do you have any suggestions to improve the clarity and structure of the SiSWE?

We recommend incorporating more visual elements alongside text to enhance the accessibility and appeal of the standards document. This would support a wider range of learning styles and encourage the use of the Standards throughout a social worker's career.

Simplifying the structure and language of the standards would be beneficial for both practice educators and students. As it stands, the document is unwieldy and difficult to navigate, which may hinder engagement and practical application.

## Representation and inclusivity

17. Do the standards sufficiently reflect the complexities of working in an organisational structure that upholds anti-racist practice?

Yes

No

18. Please use the space below to expand on your answer.

We recommend broadening the focus of this question beyond anti-racist practice to encompass anti-discriminatory practice in all its forms. Limiting the scope in this way risks unintentionally excluding other forms of discrimination and could render the standard itself discriminatory by omission.

Furthermore, the current standards do not sufficiently acknowledge or address the structural inequalities within which social workers operate. Many social work environments remain predominantly white, middle-class, able-bodied, and male-dominated (despite men representing only a small proportion of the workforce). Greater emphasis should be placed on recognising and challenging these systemic imbalances within the standards.

19. Do the standards sufficiently reflect the complexities of working in an organisational structure that upholds the six principles of trauma-informed practice?

Yes

No

20. Please use the space below to expand on your answer.

We strongly recommend that the principles of trauma-informed practice be meaningfully embedded throughout the standards. These principles should not be treated as an add-on but as a foundational approach that informs all aspects of social work practice. This includes how social workers communicate, interact, and engage with individuals and communities; how decisions are made about who is present in meetings and when; and how information is shared, both in content and in tone. A trauma-informed lens should shape the culture and ethos of practice, promoting safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment at every level. While a focus on the 6 principles of trauma informed practice is important, it is essential that social workers understand the many ways in which trauma impacts individuals,

## Representation and inclusivity

21. Do you think that the standards sufficiently reflect the role of social work as part of a response to ecological challenges that can impact directly on our communities?

For example, local flooding and fires or global pandemics.

Yes

No

## Representation and inclusivity

## 22. If no, what could be improved?

We believe the standards should explicitly advocate for the identification and analysis of structural factors as root causes of the challenges faced by the individuals and communities social workers support. While some of these challenges, such as those linked to climate change or migration, are already acknowledged, others may not be as immediately visible but are equally shaped by systemic inequalities and socio-political conditions.

Focusing too narrowly on specific themes such as anti-racism, trauma, or climate change risks overlooking the broader structural context in which social work operates. To remain relevant and future-proof, the standards should promote a critical understanding of the social, economic, and environmental systems that shape people's lives. This includes recognising how intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation contribute to disadvantage and distress. This requires an understanding of power in society and the governance structures impacting social work and social workers.

We suggest that the standards adopt a more holistic and forward-looking perspective, one that reflects the rapidly changing nature of our societies and the increasing unpredictability and insecurity of the world we live in. Social workers must be equipped not only to respond

## **Adaption to modern practices**

### 23. Should there be a stronger focus on digital technology within the standards?

Yes

No

## **Adaption to modern practices**

24. If yes, what type of things should be reflected?

The advent of digital technology and Artificial Intelligence present both opportunities and risks for social work practice however these tools to be used. Students should be supported to explore the impact of using digital tools, where they might enhance practice and where they might hinder however this should be in the context of wider social work practice. Again a more relevant question may be what is needed for an enabling context for best practice?

## Adaption to modern practices

25. Do you think that the standards reflect the skills practitioners need to promote a wide range of approaches to communication and engagement?

Yes

No

## Adaption to modern practices

26. If no, what could be improved?

The focus on specific sets of skills moves away from the many, varied relationships that social workers need to engage in. Focussing on relationship based practice that is person centred in nature will support workers in recognising the need for flexibility in communication styles and methods. By embedding ethics and values throughout the social work standards, we create an environment where workers are enabled and empowered to

## Adaption to modern practices

27. Do you think the standards reflect the knowledge practitioners need to support individuals' preferred ways to communicate and engage?

Yes

No

## Adaption to modern practices

28. If no, what could be improved?

See also response to Q26. Communication and engagement take place in the context of constructive professional relationships. By centering relationships in social work practice we can support practitioners to develop the skills needed to identify preferred methods of communication and engagement. Standards should reflect the need for reflective practice in a way that enables practitioners to identify barriers to communication and engagement, while developing the skills needed to be flexible in their approach to each person as an

## Wellbeing and professional support

29. Do you think that the standards sufficiently reflect the required knowledge and understanding of the impact of vicarious and secondary trauma on social work practitioners?

Yes

No

## Wellbeing and professional support

30. If no, what could be improved?

The standards currently do not adequately reflect the moral distress experienced by social workers. Practitioners are often placed in ethically challenging situations, where they must navigate tensions between professional values and the constraints of the systems in which they work. This includes being asked to act as gatekeepers to increasingly limited resources, which can conflict with their commitment to upholding human rights and promoting social justice.

This raises a critical question: how can we expect students to fully embrace a rights-based approach when they are entering a system that is, in many ways, structurally oppressive? The standards should acknowledge these realities and provide guidance on how to navigate them ethically and reflectively, rather than assuming ideal conditions that do not reflect the lived experience of practice.

In addition to the risk of vicarious trauma, social workers are often found to be practicing in circumstances that are risky and dangerous, causing them to experience primary trauma. The standards should promote safety in practice both for social workers and the people they work with.

We suggest that the standards shift focus toward creating the conditions for ethical, values-

## Wellbeing and professional support

31. Do the standards emphasize the importance of self-care and the risks of compassion fatigue and burnout?

Yes

No

## Wellbeing and professional support



32. If no, what else should be considered?

See response to q30. The standards should promote physical and emotional safety in social work practice. Social work is an emotionally demanding profession and while we should support developing resilience in workers, there is the potential for workers to think that experiencing burn out is a personal failing rather than a symptom of working within systems

## Practical application

33. Do the standards fit with all the settings?

Please tell us your thoughts.

Enter your answer

## Part 2

### Developing post qualifying standards for social work

We worked with a subject expert group to describe the eight core characteristics of social work practice. A short life working will further develop post qualifying standards for the social work profession using the core characteristics and the structure used for the Newly Qualified Social Work (NQSW) descriptors. This will form part of the updated Framework for Social Work and will be the foundation for professional pathways when they are developed.

We are consulting while they are still in development to ensure that we accurately represent the social work profession. Your feedback can help to shape the final content and format. [You can find more details on our website.](#)

The standards will be developed to reflect broad social worker categories rather than a job title or role.

**Newly qualified social worker** - a person in their first period of registration as a

social worker who has not yet successfully met their NQSW continuous professional learning requirements or equivalent.

**Social worker** - a social worker who has successfully met their NQSW continuous professional learning requirements or equivalent.

**Advanced social worker** - a social worker in a position of first line management, or another area of specialism, for example, a practice education, mental health officer, academic.

**Strategic social worker** - a social worker who has a senior level of management and is involved in strategic planning for social work services.

34. Do the four categories above capture the variety of social worker roles including those not in direct practice such as education or regulation?

Yes

No

35. If no, what could be improved?

We believe the current definition of the "advanced social worker" level is overly broad and requires further clarification. As it stands, any social worker with more than two to three years of experience may fall into this category, unless they are in a designated senior or strategic role. However, in the context of high vacancy rates and rapid staff turnover, social workers are often considered "experienced" after only a short period in practice. This does not always align with the level of expertise required to manage complex cases or provide informed guidance, such as advising individuals on their options under Self-Directed Support (SDS) for example.

We continue to hear concerns from people who feel that their social workers lack the necessary experience to support them effectively. At the same time, we hear from social workers who are line-managed by colleagues with only limited practice experience, promoted quickly due to workforce shortages rather than readiness for leadership. This highlights a disconnect between formal role titles and actual levels of experience and competence.

The standards must strike a balance between reflecting the current realities of the workforce and ensuring that social work practice remains safe, ethical, and grounded in appropriate levels of knowledge and skill. Clearer differentiation between levels of practice, based on actual experience and capability, would support this aim.

Additionally, there is a need for clarity on whether these proposed levels will be recognised

36. Are the definitions for each category clear?

Yes

No

### 37. If no, what could be improved?

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The short life working group will develop the content of the standards. We want to make sure the format is accessible and a useful working document. Please refer to the NQSW example [You can find more details on our website](#) to consider the following questions.

### 38. Do you think that the format used for the NQSW standards is easy to follow and accessible?

Yes

No

39. If no, what could be improved?

The NQSW standards are too convoluted and may require 'translating' for newly qualified social workers to understand them and relate them to their own practice setting. The NQSW standards should be accessible for everyone, particularly if we want to attract a more diverse future generation of social workers. The language needs to be consistent throughout a social work career and applicable for social work students to NQSWs and experienced social workers. It would be good if they would give the feel of one cohesive framework for social work rather than lots of individual bits to promote clarity, coherence, and continuity in professional development.

A more streamlined and unified framework would help social workers see their development

40. Do you think the NQSW example can be strengthened to remind people that the standards are interconnected and need to be considered holistically?

Yes

No

41. If yes, what could be improved?

The standards should be presented with ethics, values and professional practice integrated into each standard. By placing ethics as a separate standard at the start of the document it ethical considerations may be seen as separate to hands on practice rather than being the cornerstone of social work. Some practice examples may support newly qualified social

42. Does there need to be a more explicit focus on competencies, knowledge and skills in the standards?

Yes

No

0. If yes, what could be improved?

Enter your answer

43. Is there anything else the short life working group should consider as they further develop the standards?

The standards as presented seem quite complex and difficult to evidence in some areas. These should be rationalised and simplified. There is a danger that by focussing on competencies, knowledge and skills we dilute social work practice to a set of tasks or exercises to be completed rather than an holistic profession drawing on a range of knowledge, personal qualities and values. It is important that NQSWs view the standards as an integral part of their professional development, they should map a natural progression

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