

International Federation of Social Workers

Draft Policy Statement For Consultation – May 2012

POLICY STATEMENT

EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL WORKING ENVIRONMENTS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The Responsibilities of Employers of Social Workers

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INTRODUCTION

The General Meeting agreed in 2006 to develop a policy statement on the role of employers in creating and supporting an appropriate environment for the effective and ethical practice of social work. This paper proposes a new IFSW policy on creating an effective and ethical environment for the practice of social work, identifying the role of employers.

1 IFSW PROCESS

The decision to develop a policy statement on the role of employers was taken in 2006. A first draft of a policy statement was distributed in advance of the 2010 General Meeting. It was discussed briefly at that meeting, with some countries voicing support and others proposing the need for more reflection and amendment. Given that the period for consultation prior to the meeting had been short, the paper was referred back to the Executive for further work.

The paper was revised and issued for consultation on 3 February 2012. Few comments were received by the closing date on 30 April 2012. Following further revisions, the paper is now reissued for final consultation and discussion in Stockholm.

Following further consideration, the title of the policy paper has been changed to the following:

Effective and Ethical Working Environments for Social Work: the Responsibilities of Employers of Social Workers

This new title makes it clear that there are several factors which help to create the working environment but that employers have a significant responsibility.

The General Meeting will be invited to approve the policy statement at its meeting in July 2012 in Stockholm.

2 RATIONALE

Social work makes a real difference in and has a significant impact on the lives of thousands of people. Social workers take action: they engage in securing human rights for individuals and communities, they work alongside people facing major crises and, when necessary, they take action to protect those who are most at risk. Maintaining and promoting good quality social work practice, within an accountable and ethical framework, is part of the process of earning and strengthening the public trust in the profession which is needed to ensure funding and support for the role.

Most professional social work practice takes place as paid employment in organisations that can be in the public sector (government), non-governmental/not-for-profit sector or private sector. These organisations are usually accountable to elected politicians, governing bodies of public representatives or owners of private companies. They employ managers to supervise operations, who may not be social workers. In some countries social workers can be self-employed but often undertake work under contract with one of these agencies. The ability of social workers to practice effectively and ethically is therefore significantly influenced by the working environment created by employers and managers in the agencies where they work.

This policy recognises that social workers usually exercise their responsibilities in practice with individuals, groups and communities within their roles as agency or organisational representatives (IFSW 1996). They are frequently working alongside colleagues from other human service professions, such as nurses and teachers. Social work does not exist in a vacuum.

The last 20-30 years has seen a worldwide interest in finding new ways to support and improve effective public services, including social services. Reliance on traditional forms of political accountability has been supplemented or even replaced in many countries by management principles, aiming to make public services more efficient and effective and to provide a better service for people. Some have called these approaches 'New Public Management'. These approaches recognise the importance of technical knowledge and professional skill but tend to place reliance

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on managerial tools which include financial incentives (often linked to market arrangements), statistical targets for organisations and individuals and 'performance management'. Some management theorists have argued that robust management is essential to protect the public from the self-interest of the professions and to ensure effective professional accountability. Tensions between these management strategies and professional values and approaches have been found in practice. For example, a statistical target which values speedy assessment of new cases, without specifying the quality of the assessments and of the human relationships involved, is likely to encourage ineffective and unethical social work practice if speed is 'counted' by managers and quality is ignored.

The organisational contexts of social work clearly have a profound influence on the quality and standards of the profession's activities and the ability of social workers to practice ethically and effectively. This policy statement sets out the framework for arrangements between employers, senior managers and social workers to create and support effective and ethical working environments for social work practice.

3 ISSUES

3.1 Complexity of role

Social workers are frequently called on to balance the potentially conflicting needs and rights of service users, family members and the wider community alongside contextual tensions. In recognition of this complex role, and in order to protect the interests of service users, the wider community, agencies and social workers themselves, there is a need for agencies which provide social work services to have clear policies and statements which:

- Inform services users about what they should expect of social work;
- Acknowledge the tensions between service user needs and rights, professionalism and management and political, economic and societal factors;
- Inform about the contribution, role and tasks of social work towards the wellbeing of the community within the broader policy contexts;
- Support and maintain a good standard and quality of social work practice, education, training, professional supervision and regulation which inevitably depends on ensuring an effective relationship between social workers and service users;
- Inform organisational settings about how to maintain good standards in social work practice so that organisational structures provide the environment and tools needed for meeting service user rights and needs;
- Ensure that social workers abide by and in turn are not put in a position that conflicts with their professional code of ethics;
- Promote the status of social workers and enable professional resources to be better used;
- Promote the links between social work and human rights.

3.2 Values and governance of practice

Social workers work in a range of organisational structures, including government bureaucracies, health services, non-governmental and civil society agencies, private companies and as self-employed professionals. More established professions recognise the need for dual governance arrangements, which take account of the need for political, managerial and resource accountability alongside respect for

professional ethics, values and practice standards. As a newer profession, social work tends not to have established arrangements for governance of professional practice. In many countries the political/managerial governance arrangements take precedence and there can be little or no recognition of or respect for professional values, ethical principles and practice standards. Formal and informal evidence from studies of practice suggest that the most effective social work takes place in environments which balance respect for professional values and standards with organisational accountabilities. An open environment which encourages learning, critical reflection and challenge, fully involving service users/consumers/clients in these processes, is more likely to result in high quality services, public satisfaction and the avoidance of bad practice (including the ill-treatment or abuse of vulnerable service users). This climate or culture can only be created and sustained by the leaders of organisations, who have a right to expect support in doing so from professionals and all employees.

3.3 Involving service users¹

Social work is centrally concerned with supporting the rights, empowerment, self-determination and development of people. It is committed to values of equality, human rights, social justice and democracy. Respect for recipients of services (consumers, users, clients) is therefore at the heart of ethical and effective practice. The emergence of formal and informal groups of service users in recent years has highlighted the significance of involving service users not only in work on their own problems but also in helping to shape the policy and services of agencies.

Service users have come together in their own organisations and networks, to secure their human and civil rights and increase their say and involvement over their lives and services that may affect them. The best known and most visible example of a movement and organisation of service users is the international disabled people's movement, which developed the phrase, 'Nothing about us without us'. However,

¹ With acknowledgements to 'Hong Kong Agenda Consultation Paper: Service User/ Consumer Involvement and Social Work', written for IFSW by Peter Beresford, Director, Centre for Citizen Participation, Brunel University and Chair of Shaping Our Lives, UK user controlled organisation and network <http://ifsw.web5.bestsite.ch/p38001933.html>

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such movements and organisations have been developed by a very wide range of social work service users. Their objectives coincide closely with and help advance the goals and concerns of social work, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers. Consumer/User involvement is thus a core concern of service user organisations and movements and also helps to make real the participatory values and commitments of international social work. Through service users/consumer involvement, social work can more effectively achieve its goals and values.

The involvement of service users is essential in creating effective and ethical working environments for social work.

3.4 Related guidance

For further guidance reference can be made to other IFSW Policies including the European Region Standards of Practice (IFSW 2010) guidelines on Induction, Supervision, Workload Management and Continuing Professional Development.

4 IFSW POLICY STATEMENT
EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL WORKING ENVIRONMENTS
FOR SOCIAL WORK:
The Responsibilities of Employers of Social Workers

Introduction

This policy provides guidelines regarding the working environment required for:

- effective and ethical social work practice;
- alignment of organisational and social work practice objectives;
- protection of the interests of service users; and
- promotion of good standards of practice and quality services.

It is recognised that the context for practice varies according to local circumstances and that local practice must be guided by local and national policies and guidelines, such as guidance for employers and agencies published by national regulatory bodies.

This policy must be read alongside the IFSW/IASSW joint statements on the definition of social work (Appendix 1), ethical principles for the practice of social work (Appendix 2), global standards for qualifications for the social work profession (IFSW 2004) and the IFSW statement on human rights (IFSW 1996).

2 Organisational context

Social work is practised in a variety of settings including state services, health care, specialist agencies, independent practices, voluntary and not-for-profit bodies, user-led organizations, private sector companies and cooperatives.

Many social work roles help implement national policies. For example, social workers are essential in enabling local government, schools, health care and justice services to carry out their roles.

In safeguarding human, social and economic rights, governments and organisations that employ social workers have a vital role, working with the profession and others, to seek to secure sufficient resources to meet needs and maintain standards of good practice.

3 Agency responsibilities

3.1 General arrangements for supporting effective and ethical practice

To practice effectively and ethically, social workers need a working environment that upholds ethical practice and is committed to standards and good quality services. All employers, social workers and service users should have the possibility to refer to a body with the legally recognised responsibility for safeguarding professional standards and ethical practice.

A positive working environment is created where the values and principles of managers and social workers are consistent with each other and mutually reinforcing. There is substantial evidenceⁱ that the most effective social work services are provided in situations where employers understand the social work task, respect their employees and are committed to implementing professional values.

A framework for supporting good practice needs to take account of ethical principles and ensure effective induction, supervision, workload management and continuing professional development.

The following elements enable social workers to practice ethically:

- Written policies setting out standards of ethical practice provide clarity and protection for service users, social workers and agencies. Such policies need to be informed by agreed national ethical standards and the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles. Social workers should never be required to do anything that would put at risk their ability to uphold such ethical standards, including policies on confidentiality, equal opportunities and risk management;
- Quality social work services draw on research and practice evidence. Policies should be informed by research and practice evidence as well as by standards and guidelines regularly published by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of the Schools of Social Work as well as those in the national associations and regulatory frameworks;

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- The public, including service users/consumers should be regularly informed about these standards, policies and procedures and provided with information about how to raise concerns or make complaints about standards of practice;
- People engaged as social workers must be suitable to enter the workforce, hold an appropriate recognised qualification that entitles them to practice as social workers, provide references (including evidence that they are not a risk to service users) and demonstrate that they understand their roles and responsibilities, including their ethical duties;
- Alignment of service and social work values are essential for effective services. This includes upholding and implementing principles of human rights and social justice that are the basis of social work practice;
- Dangerous, discriminatory or exploitative behaviour and practice must be dealt with promptly through the implementation of policies and procedures. Such policies should provide measures to prevent and minimise violence, making it clear to staff, social workers and service users that violence, threats or abusive behaviour is not acceptable;
- Social workers have a right for their health and occupational safety to be protected. Evidence confirms that social workers frequently experience trauma or violence in their work and they are vulnerable to work-related stress and burn-out due to the nature of the work;

3.2 Work load and Case Management

- The adoption and implementation of policies on workload and caseload management make a major contribution to the provision of quality services to services users. Workload and caseload management practices must consider the basic tenets of social work intervention, including the centrality of human relationships, the need to manage risk and complexity and the duty to highlight unmet need;
- The physical working environment has an important part to play in the support of effective and ethical practice including, for example, the physical

arrangements and procedures required for confidential interviewing and storage of confidential records;

3.3 Continuous Professional Development and an Organisational Environment of Learning

- Continuing professional development and further training enable social workers to strengthen and develop their skills and knowledge and ensure that agencies adapt to the changing needs of service users and changing organisational realities. Orientation and induction training provided to new entrants and those moving jobs are essential, including the management of risk, making complex professional judgments and the fulfilment of statutory obligations such as the protection of minors and vulnerable adults;
- Good quality, regular social work supervision by people who have the necessary experience and qualifications in social work practice is an essential tool to ensure accountable and ethical practice. Research has confirmed that supervision is an important vehicle for supporting the management function in promoting creative and reflective practice, supporting staff resilience and wellbeing and continuous professional development;
- Systematic reviews of services and practice, led by social workers who have experience of the field, should be held regularly. These exercises provide important feedback to social workers, including the identification of effective practice. They also provide support, training and action when poor or unethical practice is identified;
- Career development opportunities for social workers wishing to develop advanced practice skills as well as for those leading to the most senior positions within the agency need to be available. These not only meet the individual needs of social workers but can also constitute an effective tool for retaining valuable practice knowledge and experience in the organisation and for preventing high staff turnover and difficulties in recruitment that are typical challenges constantly being faced by social work services.

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- Investing in the future of the profession by contributing to the provision of social work education and training is essential. The provision of effective practice learning and workplace assessment for student social workers not only supports new entrants but also enhances organisational learning environments and opens them up to innovative practices and opportunities. These are recognised as key elements in attracting and keeping skilled and committed future employees;
- Rates of pay or fees for social work practice need to be comparable with similar professionals and recognise the skill and qualifications of social workers;
- Professional associations and trades unions make a positive contribution to service quality, protecting and supporting service users by ensuring an appropriate working environment and developing and sustaining public confidence.

4 Conclusion

The creation of an appropriate working environment for social work has, as its principle objective, the creation of better outcomes for service users by helping social workers to deliver the best service they can at all times. In order to achieve this objective, the social worker and the employer must be willing to engage jointly in these processes. Both the employer and the social worker have responsibilities for supporting good practice.

APPENDIX 1

THE DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK

The definition of social work was adopted jointly by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of the Schools of Social Work in 1982 and revised in 2001. It is understood that social work in the 21st century is dynamic and evolving, and therefore no definition should be regarded as exhaustive.

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments.

Social work utilises a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments. Social work interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. These include:

- Counselling;
- Clinical social work;
- Group work;
- Social pedagogical work;
- Family treatment and therapy
- Helping people obtain services and resources in the community;
- Agency administration;
- Community organisation and
- Social and political action to impact social policy and economic development.

APPENDIX 2

SOCIAL WORK ETHICAL PRINCIPLES²

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.

The purpose of the Statement of Principles of IFSW and IASSW on ethics is to promote ethical debate and reflection in the member organisations, among the providers of social work in member countries, as well as in the schools of social work and among social work students.

The joint IFSW and IASSW statement aims to encourage social workers across the world to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case.

The Joint Statement on Ethical Principles states that social work is based on the principles of human rights, human dignity and social justice. These principles clearly promote and testify the purpose of social work to set itself standards that marry the promotion and realisation of Human Rights.

² “Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles” was approved at the General Meetings of the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work in Adelaide, Australia, October 2004

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