

Supporting Ethical Practice: Workplace Resources for Social Workers

Workplace resources for social workers

Ethical social work practice is dependent not only on the knowledge and skill of social work professionals but on the capacity of the work environment to support and facilitate such practice.

Accordingly, the *Code of Ethics* (2010) outlines a number of ethical responsibilities relating to the workplace and the types of resources a social worker may need to meet their ethical obligations to clients.

This document outlines those aspects of the Code that relate to the provisions of the workplace environment. It is designed to inform and support social workers, their employers, clients and representatives in challenging and improving service provision in accordance with Section 5.4.1 of the *Code of Ethics* (2010).

What are workplace resources?

A workplace resource, for the purposes of this paper, refers to any resource a social worker may need to practice according to ethical and practice standards of the profession in Australia.

This may include:

- physical resources such as access to a private space in which to conduct counselling (*Code of Ethics* section 5.4.2 g)
- human resources such as access to clinical supervision and debriefing (5.4.2 f)
- education and training resources to ensure the currency of professional knowledge and skill (5.1.5)
- operational resources such as policies, procedures and guidelines that reflect the ethical standards of the profession (5.4.1 d, f).

Given the focus on ethical practice this guideline does not reflect, nor is it intended to address, issues relating to the workplace environment that may be dealt with elsewhere. This includes for example:

- occupational health and safety legislation and international standards with regard to specific pieces of office equipment or appropriate lighting and ventilation
- the provisions of legislation, policy and practice frameworks specific to a particular context, such as health services or child protection
- the exact type or quantity of equipment, such as computers, phones or vehicles, required to undertake a particular work function.

It should be noted, however, that all of the ethical issues identified in this paper are potentially issues that will require specific consideration with regard to social worker, client and others safety and wellbeing in the workplace. As such, though not specified below, consideration of relevant WorkSafe, occupational health and safety and related practice implications of the issues raised below should ideally be considered and addressed in tandem and at an organisational level (or equivalent).

While this guideline may not define the exact nature of workplace resources required it should serve to draw attention to those areas which are, at the very least, ethically relevant.

Who is responsible for ensuring ethical practice in the workplace?

Social workers are responsible for ensuring that they practice according to the *Code of Ethics* (2010). However, when a social worker's ability to practice according to ethical standards is put at risk by workplace action/ inaction, policy, procedure or practice, the social worker has a further duty to:

- report and/or challenge and/or work to improve workplace practices (see *Code of Ethics* section 5.4.1 c)
- access available channels to promote or facilitate required change (5.4.1).

This might include available organisational channels, accessing the support of a Union and/or exploring whistleblower protection options.

- As Managers, advocate for resources to meet the needs of clients and staff (5.4.2 b, h).

What workplace resources do social workers need to practice ethically?

The context and capacity in which a social worker might practice can vary substantially.

Consider, for example, social workers who practice in different:

- service settings, such as a mental health social worker who works remotely and a social worker who drafts policy in a large government department
- roles, including those within the same workplace, such as the needs of the social worker who provides face-to-face counselling versus their Team Leader or Manager.

Consequently, it is not possible to state categorically which resources are essential to ethical practice in every setting. Rather the *Code of Ethics* (2010) can act as a guide in determining whether the lack or absence of a particular resource is an ethical issue.

The remainder of this paper looks at four kinds of resource and links each to a specific provision of the *Code of Ethics* (2010). These are:

- physical resources
- human resources
- educational and training resources
- operational resources.

What physical resources do social workers need to practice ethically?

The AASW regularly receives enquiries from social workers who are concerned that the physical arrangements of their workspace compromise their capacity to deliver a service according to ethical standards.

The *Code of Ethics* (5.4.2 g) states that social workers will provide and/or advocate for staff to have a physical work environment which supports effective practice, including appropriate arrangements for confidential interviewing and storage of confidential records.

Common ethical issues related to the physical environment include:

- the absence, lack or inadequacy of equipment needed to perform a role
- the absence, lack or inadequacy of space required to deliver a service or support
- open plan and/or shared work spaces.

The absence, lack or inadequacy of space required to deliver a service or support

Social workers are committed to ensuring the best interests of the client are maintained as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others (5.2.1).

It may be that an organisation, employer or social worker identifies the need for a service or support, however if the space in which to deliver the service is inadequate, this can compromise both the interests of the client and the capacity of staff to deliver an ethical service.

Critical issues may include:

- provision of a private space in which to conduct confidential activities, such as counselling (5.4.2 g) (see also issues related to open-plan and shared workspaces below)
- space to accommodate and maintain adequate levels of staff (5.4.2 e)
- access to spaces at a time that allows for the safe and timely completion of tasks. For example:
 - it is best practice for case notes to be contemporaneous. Space should ideally be available for social workers to complete critical work-related tasks in a manner consistent with minimum Practice Standards (2003).

Open-plan and/or shared work spaces

Open-plan or shared work environments can present particular challenges to ethical practice.

Critical issues include:

- Maintaining privacy and confidentiality of information as it is collected, recorded, shared and transmitted whether verbally, in writing or electronically (5.2.4 and 5.2.5).
- Ensuring clients can physically present at a service or support without compromising their privacy, or if not possible, ensuring that policy, procedure and practice measures are in place to protect confidentiality.
- Ensuring clients are provided with clear, honest and accurate information about the service setting (5.2.2 b) and what measures are in place to:
 - protect their privacy and confidentiality (5.2.4 and 5.2.5) prior to their engaging in a service or support (5.2.2 and 5.2.3)
 - manage any conflicts of interests or professional boundaries where they may be

known to or wish to access co-located services or staff (5.1.6 and 5.1.7).

- Having a private space in which to conduct sensitive and confidential conversations and activities such as case conferences, counselling and supervision.

The absence, lack of or inadequacy of equipment required to perform a role

In general, the adequacy of equipment is an issue that will be addressed and guided by occupational health and safety provisions, WorkSafe policies and practice guidelines. However it is possible that inadequacy of equipment can represent an ethical issue. Examples might include:

- a lack of secure physical and/or electronic storage to ensure the confidentiality of client information
- lack of access to a mobile phone for staff who conduct home visits or outreach.

In summary, and as highlighted earlier, issues relating to the physical environment may constitute not only ethical issues, but critical issues in terms of social worker, client and others safety and wellbeing. It is therefore important that social workers and employers also refer to the provisions of relevant WorkSafe/OH&S legislation, policies and procedures in addressing the kinds of issues outlined above.

What human resources do social workers need to practice ethically?

The AASW regularly receives enquiries from social workers who are concerned that human resource arrangements compromise their capacity to deliver a service according to ethical standards.

In order to practice according to the *Code of Ethics* (2010) social workers require:

- adequate staff levels and acceptable working conditions (5.4.2 e)
- provision of professional supervision, including cultural supervision where appropriate (5.4.2 f)\
- provision or arrangement of debriefing, crisis and/or ongoing support, especially when they experience difficult or traumatic circumstances (5.4.2 j)
- fair and responsible performance evaluation, including the provision of timely feedback and the inclusion of those evaluated in the process (5.4.2 k).

Adequate staff levels and acceptable working conditions for staff

What constitutes adequate staffing levels and acceptable work conditions will obviously vary greatly depending on the nature and context of practice. For this reason, the AASW does not specify exactly what constitutes adequate staff levels and conditions.

However as a general rule and in order to support ethical practice case/work loads should be such that adequate time is available for social workers to complete the range of tasks associated with delivery of a service or support, including:

- completion of case notes and other administrative duties (5.4.2 d)
- participation in regular supervision and staff meetings (5.1.5 and 5.4.2 d, f)
- participation in continuing professional development activities (5.1.5 and 5.4.2 h, i)
- debriefing and/or ongoing support following difficult or traumatic circumstances (5.4.2 j).

Acceptable work conditions (5.4.1) are those that are:

- safe and equitable
- non-discriminatory
- not in any way oppressive, disempowering or culturally inappropriate, and
- support social workers to practice according to the *Code of Ethics* (2010).

As with any kind of workplace resource, these ethical considerations should be taken into account in a broader workplace health and safety context. For example, consideration should be given to how these issues might be monitored, reported and addressed in relation to all relevant occupational health and safety/risk management considerations.

What education and training resources do social workers need to practice ethically?

Professional integrity is a fundamental social work value and includes a social workers commitment to lifelong professional development and maintenance of practice competence (*Code of Ethics* section 3.3). Consequently, the maintenance of current practice knowledge, theory and skill is critical to a social workers capacity to practice ethically (5.1.5).

Social workers are responsible for ensuring their levels of knowledge, theory and skill are appropriate to the service or support they are providing (5.1.5 a).

If, however, in the course of employment, an employer requires a social worker to operate beyond their current levels of competence, knowledge or skill, it is reasonable to expect that appropriate supervision and training is made available or accessible (5.1.5 b).

Social workers in particular settings, such as private practice, who may not have immediate access to a supervisor, should ensure that external supervision, debriefing and arrangements to ensure practice competence is maintained are in place (5.1.5 b).

If an employer does not provide relevant training and / or supervision, social workers are committed to taking steps to ensuring the required support is actively sought (5.1.5 c).

This might include, for example, notifying management that ethical and practice standards are compromised and, if necessary, redirecting clients to other appropriate supports (5.4.1 j).

Social workers in management roles should ensure that staff under their direction receive ongoing professional education and advocate for adequate resources to meet staff development needs (5.4.2 h).

What operational resources do social workers need to practice ethically?

An operational resource is anything that communicates to staff, clients or relevant others what, when, where, who and why a particular activity/service/action will, must or should take place.

The most critical operational resources are:

- policies and procedures
- practice guidelines
- communication materials that outline important information about the service or support to others
- quality improvement processes.

Operational resources that support ethical practices standards are those that attend to the provisions of the *Code of Ethics (2010)*. In the development or review of procedural or practice guidelines, particular attention should be given to section 5.1 to 5.6 of the *Code*, which outlines in detail social workers ethical responsibilities.

For example, operational resources that reflect the provisions of section 5.1.5 Practice Competence of the *Code of Ethics* might include:

- a recruitment policy that outlines minimum levels of knowledge, skill and competence relevant to undertaking a particular role
- a professional development procedure which outlines how staff will be assessed and supported to access ongoing education and training opportunities
- a practice guideline that outlines how and when supervision and debriefing will take place and/or be facilitated
- information for potential clients, allied service providers or others that outlines the level of knowledge, skill and expertise that can be expected from a particular service or support
- a quality improvement process that outlines when, by whom and in what circumstances policy, procedure and practice will be reviewed.

Social workers who are required to practice in the absence of or under policies and procedures that contravene the *Code of Ethics* (2010) are committed to appropriately challenge, and/or report, and/or work to improve such documents and practices (5.4.1).

Where can I find more information?

Social workers who require more detailed information or would like to discuss a particular workplace resource and its implications for ethical practice can access the Ethics Consultation Service on 03 9320 1044 or at ethicsconsult@asw.asn.au