

# **Newly Qualified Social Worker descriptors – example**

# Table of contents

What are the standards? .....	3
How to use the standards – general principles .....	4
Standard 1 – ethics, values and rights-based practice .....	5
Standard 2 - communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice .	7
Standard 3 - critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making. ....	9
Standard 4 - promoting wellbeing, support and protection.....	11
Standard 5 - working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts. ....	13
Standard 6 - use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice .....	15
Standard 7 – self-awareness and reflexivity .....	17
Standard 8 – professional leadership.....	19

## How to use this document

This document sets out each standard for social workers, followed by a description of what this means at the Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) stage and ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.

The standards are relevant to all registered NQSWs and social work practice, regardless of setting. NQSWs, supervisors, managers and others involved in supporting NQSWs must be familiar with this document.

## What are the standards?

The standards for social workers describe the knowledge, skills and values common to all professional social work practice regardless of setting. The NQSW descriptors reflect the characteristics of professional practice expected to develop within this early career stage and how NQSWs can demonstrate them through their practice. They build on and consolidate learning accessed through social work education and advance the professional development of NQSWs as registered social workers. They should be considered holistically with ethics, values and rights-based practice at the centre.

The standards provide a framework to support NQSWs to understand and articulate the unique contribution of social work, the power and authority afforded to the protected title and responses to ethical dilemmas that arise. They are an integral part of the NQSW Supported Year and how NQSWs meet their continuous professional learning (CPL) registration requirements. The standards are intended to be used within legislative and policy contexts including Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC), integrated health and social care for adults, community justice, The Promise, the Review of Adult Social Care and developing a trauma informed and responsive nation and workforce.

The development of the standards has been informed by existing frameworks used to support CPL including [Continuous Learning Framework \(CLF\)](#), [Step into Leadership](#) and the [Scottish Social Services Council \(SSSC\) Codes of Practice](#). They build on the [Standards in Social Work Education \(SISWE\)](#) and are underpinned by the same ethical principles (Appendix 1) and promote the overarching responsibility of contributing to the wellbeing and safety of people, including families and carers.

This document has been developed in conjunction with the areas involved in the early implementation of the NQSW Supported Year. It builds on earlier work by a subject expert group to articulate the core characteristics of social work practice and findings from evaluation<sup>1 2</sup> and research<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon, J et al (2020) Evaluation of a pilot project for Newly Qualified Social Workers in Scotland


<sup>2</sup> SSSC (2020) Learning from the NQSW pilots and next steps in developing a supported year

<sup>3</sup> Grant et al (2022) Newly qualified social workers in Scotland – a five-year longitudinal study

## How to use the standards – general principles


- The standards are relevant to all social work practice, regardless of setting. NQSWs will consolidate and develop their practice across all eight standards.
- The standards are interconnected and should be considered holistically. Ethics, values and rights-based practice are critical to all standards.
- The ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice is not intended as an exhaustive list of indicators that must be evidenced.
- NQSWs, supervisors, managers and others involved in supporting NQSWs must be familiar with the standards and use them as a basis for learning opportunities, professional development planning, discussion and review.
- NQSWs will collaborate with their supervisors to identify and access learning opportunities which will help to demonstrate their individual development across the standards in addition to the mandatory learning activity.
- It is important to help the NQSW identify their areas of strength, consolidation, or development across the standards.
- An appreciation of [how social workers learn in the workforce](#) and the importance of workplace learning opportunities rather than a reliance on formal training courses forms the basis for how NQSWs will evidence progress against the standards.

## Standard 1 – ethics, values and rights-based practice

	<p><b>Ethics, values and rights-based practice</b> – develop an understanding of and apply ethical principles and values to all aspects of professional practice. Recognise sources and impact of social inequality and systemic oppression. Take action to protect and advocate for human rights and social justice, including development of an anti-racist, intersectional approach.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will continue to develop a strong ethical base that emphasises the importance of building a positive, professional relationship with people, including families, carers and professional colleagues. At the newly qualified stage, they will begin to show an understanding of how to actively promote and defend human rights and start to champion issues of social justice within the context of their work setting. They will recognise the contribution of social, structural and economic factors, including poverty, to people's experiences and outcomes. The NQSW will develop their critical reflection skills to recognise and put aside any personal prejudices they may have, to work within guiding ethical principles and demonstrate professional practice.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>understand and apply ethical principles and the <a href="#">SSSC Codes of Practice</a> in all aspects of my own practice and behaviour.</li> <li>understand and manage the complex balance of rights, responsibility, autonomy, freedom and choice, with risk, wellbeing and protection.</li> <li>recognise, challenge and work to reduce social injustice through knowledge and analysis of the impact of social and structural factors on the lives of people – such as poverty, racism, poor housing, social exclusion, intersectional discrimination and disadvantage.</li> <li>promote and apply anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice by recognising, seeking to understand and reflecting on people’s values and beliefs, diverse backgrounds, cultural characteristics, language requirements, needs, experiences, and preferences, understanding how these interact with societal structures and adjusting my practice as required.</li> <li>identify intentional and unintentional discrimination, recognise how identities can shape life experiences, and recognise, respect and value difference.</li> </ul>


	<p>develop and apply the skill of advocating with or on behalf of individuals and groups.</p> <p>value and demonstrate a range of skills and qualities which recognise and promote strengths, hope, self-determination and a rights-based approach.</p> <p>develop an understanding of and confidence in clearly explaining my professional responsibilities and authority; how that contributes to my role in promoting people's wellbeing, safety and protection.</p> <p>demonstrate ethical practice in recording and sharing sensitive and confidential information at the right time and when there is a clear rationale to do so.</p> <p>actively engage with tools, resources and support that encourage self-awareness and critical reflection on how my own identity, experience, personal values and biases impact my practice.</p>
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## Standard 2 - communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice

	<p><b>Communication, engagement and relationship-based professional practice</b> – demonstrate knowledge and skills to support effective communication, collaboration and relationship-based practice in a range of settings. Use trauma responsive approaches to actively involve and support the involvement of people, including families and carers to plan, implement and evaluate interventions.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will further develop and demonstrate their verbal, written and digital communication and engagement skills in a range of formal and informal settings including the legislative context of their work setting. They will begin to draw together theoretical knowledge and research to communicate effectively and confidently to a wide range of people, for different purposes and at various levels. As the NQSW progresses through the Supported Year their experience of communicating, collaborating and engaging in highly charged, complex or challenging situations will grow. NQSWs will reflect on and become more aware of power differentials, their professional authority, the use of self and relationship-based practice in developing and sustaining a relationship in changing and challenging situations and circumstances.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>value and strive to build respectful, human relationships that acknowledge diversity and are inclusive and culturally responsive, using clear, destigmatising language.</li> <li>demonstrate ethical practice, professionalism, professional integrity and emotional intelligence in the management of my relationships with others.</li> <li>develop the skills to manage professional relationships, boundaries and endings with integrity, care, compassion and respect.</li> <li>recognise the importance of understanding a person’s communication and engagement preferences, and use my understanding of theory, technology and practice to inform and adapt my approach to facilitate effective communication which meets their needs and abilities.</li> <li>use a range of skills and strategies to engage, communicate and build effective, empathetic relationships with people,</li> </ul>

	<p>including families and carers, colleagues and other professionals in a range of settings and circumstances.</p> <p>empower people to be involved in decisions made about them, promoting rights, choice and inclusivity.</p> <p>value and take account of the expertise of people, including families, carers and other professionals involved in their lives.</p> <p>value and take account of people’s identities, beliefs and values and how these shape their experiences, including how they experience services.</p> <p>advance my ability to communicate and explain clear professional reasoning, judgements and decisions in routine, complex and challenging situations including with people, families and carers, professional decision making forums and legal hearings.</p> <p>value and promote the importance of sharing knowledge of research and best practice with people, including families and carers.</p> <p>develop confidence in identifying, collaborating and negotiating with others the need for statutory and procedural intervention, using professional authority as required.</p> <p>identify and analyse the supports and barriers to effective collaboration and participation in planning interventions and apply this knowledge to the process.</p> <p>develop and use skills and techniques, using creativity and flexibility, to elicit views, and manage change, resistance, conflict and crisis.</p> <p>value and apply the process of reviewing and evaluating interventions and outcomes with people, including families, carers and other professionals to inform practice.</p> <p>collaborate with people, families, carers, colleagues and a range of organisations to identify, assess, plan and deliver personalised services and outcomes and rights-based approaches to improve situations and outcomes.</p>
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## Standard 3 - critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making.

	<p><b>Critical thinking, professional judgement and decision making</b> - develop competence and confidence in applying critical thinking, analysis, research, and best practice to inform professional judgement and decision making in all areas of practice including assessment and review.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will develop their skills to critically reflect on their practice and analyse information to inform professional judgements, recommendations and decisions in a range of settings including the legislative context of their work setting. Their ability to provide a clear rationale verbally or in writing will play a key role in promoting self-determination, positive changes, support and protection. The NQSW will develop confidence and competence in gathering evidence, drawing on research and best practice to analyse and justify decisions. They will develop confidence in communicating their professional judgement and decisions to a variety of audiences including people, families, carers, managers, other professionals and in legal hearings. They will use supports such as supervision to make careful and complex decisions such as how and when there may be the need to intervene or to support or facilitate change or transition. They will also develop the confidence to challenge decisions of their own organisation and other professionals if they believe that the needs of people, families and carers are not being appropriately met.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>value working effectively in partnership with people, including families and carers to identify rights, needs and risks, recognising diversity and the impact of social contexts and social injustice.</li> <li>develop skills to gather and critically analyse multiple sources of information to inform professional decision making, incorporating and evaluating existing and new knowledge.</li> <li>access, understand and critically evaluate relevant research findings and literature to promote, inform and implement best practice in assessment and decision making.</li> <li>competently use assessment frameworks, processes and relevant legislation to assess and evaluate needs, assets, strengths and risks to agree a course of action to achieve positive outcomes.</li> </ul>

develop confidence in exercising professional judgement based on a critical analysis of all aspects of a situation and keep complete, clear, relevant, accurate and timely records of actions, decisions and outcomes.

identify and value the need for consultation and supervision and engage in these to support complex decision making processes.

demonstrate ability to make authoritative and informed judgements where early intervention can prevent escalation of problems.

develop confidence in identifying, collaborating, explaining and negotiating with others the need for statutory and procedural intervention.


present, verbally and in writing, evidence informed assessment of strengths, needs, support requirements and risks, to people, families, carers and other professionals.

demonstrate that the views of people, including families and carers are obtained and reflected in any decisions made about them.

develop confidence in ensuring people, including families and carers understand recommendations or decisions relevant to assessments and reports about their care in advance of formal meetings.


develop confidence to use judgement and knowledge to identify unmet need and challenge systemic and management decisions of organisations including my own if needs are not being appropriately met.

## Standard 4 - promoting wellbeing, support and protection.

	<p><b>Promoting wellbeing, support and protection –</b> demonstrate and apply understanding of responsibility to actively promote the wellbeing, support and protection of children and adults at risk of harm, regardless of setting or context.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>Social workers must be aware of their responsibility to promote the wellbeing, support and protection of children and adults at risk of harm or abuse irrespective of role, setting and situation. At the NQSW level, social workers will be supported to progressively undertake work alongside more experienced colleagues in complex situations, plan and manage the delivery of care, safeguard the wellbeing of adults and children across the spectrum of protection areas and exercise statutory functions that the protected title allows. In doing this they will apply the principles of social justice and human rights and confidently and effectively learn how to challenge decisions, actions or behaviours that are not in the best interests of people, or which lead to or increase harm. They will also begin to develop an understanding of the broader impact of the wellbeing, support and protection issues on others and act accordingly. They will use supports such as supervision to reflect on structural inequalities and develop the confidence to draw attention to unequal or discriminatory treatment or policies.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify and take positive action, appropriate to own role, to promote the rights, wellbeing, support and protection of vulnerable children and adults, regardless of the practice setting and context.</li> <li>develop knowledge of and apply theory and research about the importance of wellbeing and the nature of harm, neglect and risk across the lifespan.</li> <li>develop cultural competence in decision making, recognising the impact on wellbeing of unfair or unequal treatment.</li> <li>develop and apply knowledge about the processes, procedures, law and policy underpinning support and protection interventions and the role of self and others.</li> </ul>


	<p>develop knowledge and confidence to effectively apply the risk assessment and management procedures of own organisation.</p> <p>identify and take prompt action to deal with behaviour or situations that present a risk to people and reduce or contain the level of risk.</p> <p>contribute to the development, monitoring and implementation of plans to protect people and appropriately respond to changing circumstances.</p> <p>value collaborating with people, including family members and carers, to respond to, assess, analyse and manage risk of harm and abuse and support the development of care/support planning to promote wellbeing and protection.</p> <p>identify and use appropriate tools, in conjunction with people, families and carers and other professionals promoting early intervention where appropriate.</p> <p>exercise professional judgement and analysis of evidence-informed practice in supporting positive risk taking while managing risk to people, including families and carers and the wider public.</p> <p>use established processes to confidently and effectively challenge decisions, actions or behaviours that are not in the best interests of people, including families and carers or which lead to or increase harm.</p>
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## Standard 5 - working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts.

	<p><b>Working with complexity in unpredictable and ambiguous contexts</b> - develop competence and confidence in managing complexity, risk, and uncertainty in professional decision making.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs enter professional practice in a range of different settings including multidisciplinary teams and integrated services. NQSWs will begin to develop an understanding of their professional identity and how to demonstrate their professional influence within various roles and professional groups. They will be supported to gain knowledge and experience of how to become proactive in responding to the challenges and opportunities that come from evolving social policy and organisational contexts. They will become increasingly competent and confident in their role and manage professional challenges, power dynamics and differences in relation to practice. The NQSW will use supervision appropriately to develop an understanding of working with complexity in unpredictable, unanticipated, and ambiguous contexts. They will develop skills to balance the requirements of their role and any statutory functions, with an enabling and rights-based approach to practice with people, families, carers and communities.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrate the applied knowledge, skills and theories required for effective social work practice.</li> <li>draw on the concepts of strength, resilience, vulnerability, risk and resistance to understand forms of harm and apply to practice.</li> <li>demonstrate advancing professional confidence, competence and autonomy in managing complex situations within social work practice.</li> <li>recognise the limits of own role, accountability and authority and seek and make effective use of supervision, guidance and support when required.</li> <li>uphold and demonstrate the distinctive role, responsibilities and contribution of social work in partnership working.</li> <li>manage sensitive and confidential information ethically according to agency and legal requirements.</li> </ul>


	<p>demonstrate professionalism, professional integrity, self-leadership and emotional intelligence in the management of conflict in relationships and in the decision making process.</p> <p>consolidate and demonstrate appropriate use of professional authority, balancing authority and statutory functions with supporting and enabling others.</p> <p>critically reflect on my adherence to ethical principles and best practice when faced with ethical issues, dilemmas and conflicts.</p> <p>select, use, review and evaluate social work resources and interventions appropriate to people’s identified needs and own context of practice. Be creative and develop resources and use of technology where there are gaps in meeting people’s identified needs.</p> <p>access, critically evaluate and confidently implement evidence-informed approaches and methods to analyse and manage complex and uncertain situations.</p>
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## Standard 6 - use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice

	<p><b>Use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice -</b> develop knowledge and confidence in applying relevant research, policy and legislation to role. Demonstrate commitment to continuous professional learning and inquiry which supports evidence informed practice and a wider culture of learning.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>NQSWs will recognise and value the opportunity to consolidate and continually develop and update the knowledge gained from education to ensure they achieve and maintain a level of practice and best outcomes for people, including families and carers. They will have the opportunity to develop their skills to critically review and apply relevant knowledge from social work practice, professional and academic fields, legislative and policy frameworks and from the lived experience of people, including families and carers. They will seek out opportunities to refresh their knowledge of theory, research and changes to policy and legislation and share this with others. NQSWs should expect and be provided with protected time to learn, professional supervision and relevant learning opportunities and to contribute to the wider culture of learning. They will understand how social workers learn in the workplace and value informal learning opportunities during their NQSW period and beyond.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>take responsibility for recognising gaps in own knowledge and skills and seeking ways of meeting professional developmental needs.</li> <li>engage in reflective dialogue and critical thinking to evaluate and enhance own development and support the development of others.</li> <li>proactively seek and integrate feedback from others on own practice to support development, including from people, families and carers.</li> <li>consolidate knowledge about the social contexts in which people live and the impact of psychological, cultural, socio-economic, environmental and physiological factors on people’s lives.</li> <li>consolidate and further develop knowledge of the concepts of attachment, separation and loss, change, trauma and resilience and their impact on people’s lives.</li> </ul>


	<p>demonstrate and apply knowledge of current relevant law, policy and guidance to my practice, including understanding the supports, limitations and ethical challenges.</p> <p>demonstrate knowledge of and keep up to date with organisational and national policy and practice guidance, legislative changes, to ensure best practice.</p> <p>proactively seek, critically evaluate and apply a range of literature to inform own practice including factual knowledge, theoretical ideas and methodologies.</p> <p>demonstrate research-mindedness using evidence informed approaches and methods to inform assessments, decision making, the management of complex issues and ethical challenges, and to continuously improve outcomes and professional practice.</p> <p>develop digital skills and capabilities for professional practice.</p>
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## Standard 7 – self-awareness and reflexivity

	<p><b>Self-awareness and reflexivity</b> – recognise how the demands of professional social work practice affect self and others. Develop the use of reflexivity to consider what has been learned and how this learning can contribute to personal wellbeing and effective and sustainable practice.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>Self-awareness, reflection and reflexivity play a vital role in social work practice. Social workers must be able to critically reflect on and take responsibility for their actions. At the NQSW stage, the worker should create and be provided with opportunities to practice these skills. The NQSW will demonstrate developing critical analysis and reflection skills, a growing awareness and examining their identity, emotions, reactions and motives and the influence on their actions. They will begin to consciously challenge themselves and others, developing professional curiosity, creativity and self-awareness of the internal and the external influences and challenges of practice. Engagement with professional supervision opportunities is central to professional practice and NQSWs should expect to, and be provided with support, supervision and time to undertake critical reflection and to enhance personal and professional wellbeing and resilience.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recognise how work-life balance, personal wellbeing and resilience contribute to effective and sustainable practice.</li> <li>value and practice the use of reflexivity to identify, develop and apply strategies to promote my personal wellbeing.</li> <li>understand the demands of professional practice and demonstrate how to recognise signs of vulnerability in myself, or colleagues and the action required to minimise risks to health.</li> <li>recognise the importance of self and effective use of self within relationships and social work practice.</li> <li>engage and relate effectively and ethically with people, including families and carers and other professionals, demonstrating professional integrity, empathy, and emotional intelligence.</li> <li>recognise organisational roles and responsibilities to support the workforce and manage the impact of demanding and complex workloads.</li> </ul>

	<p>develop and apply strategies to deal with professional concerns, conflict, challenges and change.</p> <p>seek and effectively use supervision, consultation and guidance to support critical reflection on practice, review development of skills and knowledge and evaluate professional development.</p> <p>demonstrate an awareness of own strengths, capabilities and personal and professional vulnerabilities and the contribution to and impact they have on own practice.</p> <p>develop and apply skills in workload management, identifying and prioritising work and meeting deadlines.</p>
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## Standard 8 – professional leadership

	<p><b>Professional leadership</b> - develop personal and professional authority as a social worker including when working collaboratively across agency and professional boundaries.</p>
<p>What this means for NQSWs</p>	<p>Social workers are members of an internationally recognised profession, protected in Scottish and UK law. Social workers should promote the profession and good practice, taking responsibility for the professional learning and development of self and others. The NQSW will demonstrate an understanding of their professional responsibilities as a registered worker. They will begin to develop their professional identity and understanding of their personal influence and how self-leadership impacts the profession. Their understanding will further develop by recognising that they are accountable to people, including families and carers, the public, employers and the SSSC.</p>
<p>Ways in which a NQSW may demonstrate the standards through their practice.</p>	<p>I...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>value, promote and articulate the social work role and how ethical social work practice can make a difference in people’s lives.</li> <li>practice in a way which upholds the social work profession and promotes a positive social work identity.</li> <li>promote the leadership of people, including families and carers, listening to and valuing their lived experience, and supporting and enabling their participation.</li> <li>take initiative and use creative and innovative approaches to support people, including families and carers to achieve their goals.</li> <li>demonstrate leadership skills to motivate, influence and inspire others and improve outcomes.</li> <li>contribute constructively to teamwork and development.</li> <li>demonstrate confidence in leading and contributing to professional and inter-professional meetings, facilitating effective collaboration and managing barriers and challenges.</li> </ul>

	<p>take an active role in professional meetings, networks and bodies to support own and others' learning and development.</p> <p>understand my responsibility to seek, plan and undertake ongoing professional development.</p>
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