



**Social Workers
Registration Board**
South Australia



Government
of South Australia

Companion Document

Scope of Practice
and
Social Work Services
Sector Consultation
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Acknowledgement of Country

The Social Workers Registration Board of South Australia (SWRB SA) acknowledge that the land we work on is the traditional lands of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and we pay our respects to elders, past, present, and emerging. The SWRB SA acknowledges, and respects that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Nations peoples of this country and recognises them as the traditional owners and occupants of South Australian land and waters. The SWRB SA acknowledge the violence of the colonial past and social work's part in this history and the impacts colonisation continues to have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The SWRB SA also acknowledges the strong and enduring connection they have to land and culture – always was, always will be.

From The Director

South Australia is leading the way for social workers registration. This is a milestone in the history of the profession and discipline of social work.

The South Australian Parliament passed the [Social Workers Registration Act 2021](#) (the Act) and the Social Workers Registration (Commencement) Amendment Act 2023, setting the commencement date for registration on 1 July 2025 or earlier by proclamation. The Social Workers Registration Board was appointed in March 2024 and is responsible for the Act.

The purpose of the Social Workers Registration Board of South Australia is to ensure the safety and well-being of the public by upholding high standards of competence, accountability, and professionalism among social workers.

Registration strives to enhance quality and effectiveness of social work practice. Registration restricts the use of the title: social worker, determines the qualifications, pathways to registration, and determines other requirements appropriate for registration – particularly definitions of Social Work Services and Scope of Practice.

According to the Act, The Social Workers Registration Board must define Social Work Services and Social Work Scope and Practice. This paper provides these definitions.

Kind Regards



Professor Sarah Wendt

Introduction

Welcome to the Scope of Practice and Social Work Services Consultation!

We are really pleased that you are participating in this important and historic milestone. This is the sector consultation companion document providing detailed information and background into the decisions of the Board and rationale for the Scope of Practice and Social Work Services definition.

The document is in two sections. Section 1 provides background information and details the role of the board, the definition of social work and social work in the Australian context, and summaries of the key parts of the AASW Code of Ethics (2020) and AASW Practice Standards (2023). Section 2 is the consultation section made up of 6 questions. Each question details the rationale the Board has used to compose the definition. Once you have read this document, please go to the survey on the YourSAY page and let us know what you think.

Section 1: Background

Role of the Board

The Social Workers Registration Act 2021 (the Act), states that the Board must:

- **Prepare or endorse codes of conduct, professional standards, and ethical guidelines for registered social workers.**
- If a code of conduct, professional standard or set of ethical guidelines is prepared or endorsed by the Board, the Board must:
 - (a) cause a copy of the code, standard or guidelines to be published on the Board's website, together with a statement of the operative date of the code, standard or guidelines (which may not be a date earlier than the date of publication); and
 - (b) take reasonable steps to send a copy of the code, standard or set of guidelines to each social worker to whom it applies; and
 - (c) ensure that a copy of the code, standard or set of guidelines is kept available for public inspection without charge during normal office hours at the principal office of the Registrar.
- The Board must, by notice in the Gazette, specify the meaning of the term **Social Work Services** for the purposes of the Act.
- The Board must, by notice in the Gazette, **describe the Social Work Services that are performed by the social work profession in 1 or more Scopes of Practice.**
- **A Scope of Practice** and the services described in it may be described as the Board thinks fit, including in 1 or more of the following ways:

- (a) by reference to a name or form of words that is commonly understood by persons who work in the social work services sector.
 - (b) by reference to an area of social science or learning.
 - (c) by reference to tasks commonly performed.
 - (d) by reference to individual, interpersonal, or community needs to be alleviated.
- The Board must, when developing Scopes of Practice for the purposes of this section, have regard to:
 - (a) the Practice Standards 2013 (or its successor), published by the Australian Association of Social Workers; and
 - (b) any information about the scope of social work practice published by the Australian Association of Social Workers; and
 - (c) the scheme for registration of social workers established by the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 of New Zealand; and
 - (d) the development of social work scopes of practice by the Social Workers Registration Board of New Zealand.

What is Social Work?

The definition of social work is taken from the International Federation of Social Workers:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.”

Social Workers aim to achieve social justice and human rights which is central to the professional identity and academic discipline of social work. Social workers work with, and on behalf of, individuals, children, families, groups, communities, and societies to:

- enhance their individual and collective wellbeing and social development
- resolve personal and interpersonal problems
- improve and to facilitate engagement with the broader society
- address systemic barriers to full recognition and participation
- protect the vulnerable from oppression and abuse¹.

Australian Social Work

In the Australian context, to achieve social justice and human rights which is central to the identity of social work, the profession and discipline of social work must recognise that Australia is a white settler colonial society after the invasion of the British, which resulted in the denial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and sovereignty.

This history of dispossession from lands, denigration of culture and knowledges, and attempted genocide has impacted on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, resulting in collective, community, and intergenerational trauma. Social Work played an active role in the processes of colonisation including protectionism, assimilation, and stolen generations².

It also needs to be recognised in the Australian context that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people resisted oppressive government policies, actions and practices and continue to do so today. The strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and culture is long and enduring.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be social work clients due to intergenerational trauma and disadvantage of colonisation. Therefore, Social Work in Australia needs to be honest and acknowledge the profession's role in perpetuating trauma. This can only be rectified if social

¹ <https://aasw-prod.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AASW-Code-of-Ethics-2020.pdf>

² Bennett, B., & Green, S. (Eds.). (2019). Our voices : Aboriginal social work. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

workers engage in truth-telling and reconciliation practices to enable culturally safe spaces for learning, sharing, and respect³.

Social Workers must recognise Australian history and be trained and equipped to respond within the context of this history. All social workers, irrespective of their cultural backgrounds, are required to take a proactive stance with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to demonstrate their respect, allyship and commitment to uphold their rights.

AASW Code of Ethics 2020

To achieve the aims of both the profession and discipline of social work, the Australian Association of Social Work has developed a [Code of Ethics 2020](#) (The Code). The Code outlines the ethical principles and conduct that are required of social workers to ensure effective, professional, and accountable social work practice in all social work contexts. The Code assists all social workers, collectively and individually, to act in ethically accountable ways because social workers are bound by three core principles:

- Respect for persons.
- Social Justice.
- Professional integrity.

The Code expresses the principles and responsibilities that are integral to, and characterise, the social work profession. It is intended to assist all social workers, and social work students currently enrolled in an accredited social work program collectively and individually, to act in ethical and accountable ways in the pursuit of the profession's aims.

The Social Workers Registration Board intends to endorse the AASW Code of Ethics 2020 because it:

- provides a guide and standard for ethical social work conduct and service delivery
- provides a foundation for ethical reflection and decision making
- guides social workers when determining their reciprocal rights with employers and colleagues
- provides clarification of social workers' actions in the context of industrial or legal disputes
- seeks to protect practitioners and public alike from malpractice
- holds social workers accountable for their ethical practice and acts as a basis for investigation and adjudication of formal complaints about unethical conduct.

What do Social Workers Do?

The Act states that the Board must, when developing Scopes of Practice, have regard to the AASW Practice Standards 2013 (or its successors) and the Social Workers Registration Board of New Zealand.

The AASW has published the Practice Standards 2023, which supersedes the Practice Standards 2013.

³ Bennett, B., & Gates, T. G. (2022). Decolonization and trauma-informed truth-telling about Indigenous Australia in a social work diversity course: a cultural safety approach. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 33(3), 153–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2022.2154882>

AASW Practice Standards 2023

The [AASW Practice Standards 2023](#) enable social workers to demonstrate their professional identity through their practice and ensure trust and confidence in the profession for the public and service users. The AASW Practice Standards 2023 are integral for registration because the purpose of registration is to enhance the professional standards of social work and to better protect the public.

The Social Workers Registration Board intends to endorse the AASW Practice Standards 2023 because they provide the basis for registration, accreditation criteria of teaching programs, competency/capability statements, and measures for investigation. They provide a reference point for assuring accreditation of teaching programs, quality of practice, and make social workers accountable to the people they serve.

There are nine Practice Standards.

Standard 1: Social workers conduct themselves according to the values, principles, and guidelines of the AASW Code of Ethics 2020.

Standard 2: Social workers practice in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to support their priorities and aspirations.

Standard 3: Social workers advocate for policy initiatives and approaches to practice aimed at achieving fair and equitable access for people to social, health, economic, environmental, and political resources.

Standard 4: Social workers practice respectfully and inclusively regarding culture and diversity.

Standard 5: Social workers practice within a professional knowledge framework informed by a critical understanding of contemporary social work theory and research.

Standard 6: Social workers make professional decisions based on a holistic assessment of the needs, strengths, goals, and preferences of people.

Standard 7: Social workers actively contribute to strengthening and promoting the identity and standing of the profession.

Standard 8: Social workers build and strengthen their practice through regular structured supervision from social work qualified supervisors.

Standard 9: Social workers monitor their skills, knowledge, and expertise to maintain, improve and broaden their professional development.

Section 2: Consultation Section

This section provides details for each of the corresponding questions in the survey. You can read the details here and they are also included in the survey if you find that easier. In the survey, you will be asked to answer in one of three ways:

- Yes, I agree.
- Yes, I agree but would like the following changes or additions.
- No, I don't agree, and this is the reason why.

In the survey, a text box is provided so you can write your answers or any comments.

Question 1: What is the Scope of Practice? (Part 1)

The Scope of Practice is the term used to refer to the range of responsibilities, functions, and activities of a social worker that are performed in a range of roles or ways and reflects documents such as the AASW Code of Ethics (2020) and the AASW Practice Standards (2023) (see above). It also is a requirement that the professional social worker recognise and work within the limits of their competence (this is their education and training) ⁴.

Scope of Practice provides the answer to: What do social workers do and what competency is expected?

It can therefore be concluded that the Scope of Practice for social work is to⁵:

- promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people
- adopt principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities
- engage people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Question 1: What is the Scope of Practice? (Part 2)

It is therefore a social worker's **responsibility** to influence persistent issues of poverty, inequality, violence, discrimination, and ongoing failures of social systems by:

- addressing wider impacts such as the historical impacts of colonisation, assimilation, institutional racism, exploitation, violence, abuse, neglect, oppression, and other social determinants of health

⁴ Leslie, K., Moore, J., Robertson, C., Bilton, D., Hirschhorn, K., Langelier, M., & Bourgeault, I. (2021). Regulating health professional scopes of practice: comparing institutional arrangements and approaches in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK. *Human Resources for Health*, 19(15). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-020-00550-3>

⁵ The definition has been informed by AASW and SWRB New Zealand.

- actively challenging discriminatory practices, inequality, and social injustice in organisations, systems, and wider society
- collaborating with individuals, children, groups, and communities to develop their own solutions to identified issues and work to influence change at individual, child, family, community, government, and societal levels.

Question 2: What are Social Work Services?

The Act states that the Board must, by notice in the Gazette, specify the meaning of the term **Social Work Services** for the purposes of this Act, and must, by notice in the Gazette, describe the Social Work Services that are performed by the social work profession in 1 or more Scopes of Practice.

It is therefore proposed that:

Social Work Services mean a service provided by a social worker performed in a general Scope of Practice for the purpose of engaging, assessing, analysing, formulating, intervening, evaluating, supporting, or protecting the wellbeing and safety of individuals, children, families, groups, or communities⁶.

Question 3: What are Social Workers Functions and Activities?

Social Workers support outcomes for people through **functions and activities**. It is therefore **proposed that the following functions and activities can only be performed and managed by a registered social worker**.

- Social Workers undertake evidence-informed bio-psychosocial assessments, analysis, and interventions – and must holistically consider the context of a person’s situation and their environment.
- Social Workers must apply in-depth interpersonal, communication, and relational skills to lead, manage, and problem solve complex factors that impact on the safety and wellbeing of individuals, children, families, groups, and communities.
- Social Workers must identify and respond to trauma, danger, and harm factors using an evidence informed approach.
- Social Workers must lead, manage, and address challenges, difficulty, and vulnerability that are experienced in situations where circumstances are not easily changed, and in doing so enhance and strengthen people’s ability and capacity in such circumstances.
- Social Workers must assist people experiencing crisis to endure and adapt to uncertainty, loss, and grief.

⁶ This definition has been informed by the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Act 2003.

Question 4: What are Social Workers Roles?

Social Workers can undertake such functions and activities and apply their expertise in a variety of **ways** and **roles** at macro, meso, and micro levels of practice including one or more of:

- one to one work
- groupwork
- system, service, and program design
- therapy
- counselling
- consultancy
- protection and safeguarding
- community development
- advising
- research
- education
- supervision
- facilitation
- advocacy
- crisis and case management
- policy development
- leadership.

Question 5: Where do social workers practice?

Social Workers can work in a variety of sectors and can be found in Federal and State government departments, non-government organisations, community services, in private practice, and not-for-profit and for-profit organisations. Social Workers can work in a range of practice fields including but not limited to:

- mental health, health, disability, aged care, and hospitals
- child protection and child welfare
- domestic and family violence, and sexual violence
- family support
- LGBTQIA+
- addiction, gambling, alcohol, and other drugs
- housing and homelessness
- community centres
- income support
- criminal justice systems
- refugee and asylum seeker support
- veterans' affairs
- palliative care
- rural and remote communities
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

- schools, education, academia.⁷

Each field of practice will/can have its own practice parameters and often social workers will work within an organisational practice framework that describes their work in more detail⁸. However, with a general scope of practice, it provides title protection, direction for clear education, and competency standards that enables boundaries for investigations.

Question 6: How do Social Workers Practice?

The Social Work Services and Scope of Practice that a social worker is permitted to perform must be based on appropriate education, training, ethics, value systems, and experience, that is, **how** social workers practice.

Social Workers are skilled in the application of **critical thinking, critical reflection, and self-awareness**, and commit to a process of ongoing learning and development and professional accountability to deliver the best service to people and communities.

Critical thinking means that social workers are skilled at seeking clarity through examination and evaluation of their own beliefs and actions. Critical thinking is not criticism but rather pursuing a questioning and evaluation stance in decision making. Critical reflection comes from critical thinking because it enables a social worker to make decisions that can be scrutinised by others, clarify practice, and lead to better practice in the future. Critical thinking and reflection require self-awareness. Self-awareness is a mechanism of social work practice, requiring a high level of understanding about who we are and how we behave⁹.

This is reflected in the AASW Code of Ethics 2020 and the Practice Standards 2023. However, the Act also states that social work must be underpinned by:

- theories of social work
- social sciences
- humanities
- Indigenous knowledges.

Engagement with social work theories, social sciences, humanities, and Indigenous knowledges, together with critical reflection and ongoing learning are core elements of **how** a social worker uses their professional judgement and decision making when providing Social Work Services in the Scope of Practice. These elements enable social workers to demonstrate identity and competency through their practice.

⁷ Also supported by Chenoweth, L & McAuliffe, D (originally published 2008 – now 7th ed), The Road to Social Work & Human Service Practice, Cengage Learning Australia,

⁸ The Scopes of Practice have been defined using AASW, NZASW, & NZ Registration Board resources.

⁹ Chenoweth, L & McAuliffe, D (originally published 2008 – now 7th ed), The Road to Social Work & Human Service Practice, Cengage Learning Australia.

Theories of social work

Theoretical explanations can help social workers understand and make sense of a complex human world. Social workers are required to draw on a range of theoretical perspectives to help them respond through practice. Theories embrace both explanations and practical response strategies.¹⁰

Social Sciences

Social sciences offer social workers knowledge in areas including society's institutions and structures, its histories, and its people.¹¹

Humanities

Humanities offer social workers knowledge about human society, culture, language, history, and philosophy.¹²

Indigenous Knowledges

Indigenous knowledges belong to Indigenous peoples. Indigenous knowledges are ways of being, doing, and knowing. An interrelationship exists between Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous knowledges.¹³

Non-Indigenous social workers cannot claim to be 'knowers' of Indigenous knowledges. The historical bias, privilege, and ontological knowledge of non-Indigenous social workers must be understood and analysed to break down colonisation bias (decolonisation) and its effects on social work practice.¹⁴

Non-Indigenous social workers are required through Practice Standard 2 to work in close collaboration and consultation with Indigenous peoples and governance structures.

¹⁰ Connolly, M, Harms, L., Maidment, J (2017), *Social Work Contexts and Practice*, 4th ed, Oxford University Press, London.

¹¹ <https://socialsciences.org.au/about-the-social-sciences/>

¹² <https://humanities.org.au/about-2/>

¹³ Bennett, B & Green, S (2019) *Our Voices: Aboriginal Social Work*, 2nd ed, Macmillan International, London.

¹⁴ Bennett, B (2020) What to bring when you are told not to bring a thing: The need for protocols in acknowledging Indigenous knowledges and participants in Australian research, *Journal of Sociology*, 56, 2, 167-183.

Closing Comments

The Social Workers Registration Board is responsible to fulfill the primary objects of the Act including:

- to establish and maintain a registration system for social workers
- to safeguard the public interest by ensuring that only suitably trained and qualified persons are able to practise as social workers
- to encourage the maintenance of high professional standards of both competence and conduct by registered social workers
- to ensure that registered social workers are held accountable professionally for the conduct of their practice.

The endorsement of the AASW Code of Ethics (2020) and Practice Standards (2023), together with the proposed definitions of Social Work Services and Scope of Practice are key to fulfilling these objectives, as well as consensus on the education of social workers. The definitions inform registration, accreditation of education standards (including competency and conduct), and investigations of incompetency and misconduct.