



Department
for Education

Early career standards

**Professional standards for child and
family social workers**

April 2027

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Summary

These early career standards from the Department for Education have been produced to support the development of newly qualified child and family social workers in the first two years of their career. They set out what new social workers should know and be able to do, and how employers can use these standards to strengthen the ongoing professional development of their social work workforce.

For frontline practitioners, these standards form the post-qualifying improvement standards set out under [Section 42 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017](#).

Who this publication is for

This guidance is for:

- local authorities
- social workers
- other practitioners in children's social care, including youth justice workers and family support and early-help workers
- relevant public, private and charitable sector organisations, including voluntary, community and charity workers
- parents and carers, including foster carers, kinship carers and special guardians
- social work students
- social work training providers
- higher education institutions

Main points

- the early career standards replace the 2015 post-qualifying standards (knowledge and skills statements)
- the standards provide a clearer, outcomes-focused framework describing what newly qualified social workers should know and be able to do by the end of their first two years
- the standards emphasise relationship-based, anti-discriminatory and evidence-informed practice, aligned with the national framework for children's social care
- each standard includes outcome statements, 'learn that' statements and 'learn how to' statements, giving employers and practitioners a shared structure for induction, supervision and assessment
- the standards are grounded in the best available evidence on what improves outcomes for children and families, including systemic, restorative and strengths-based approaches

- the guidance is non-statutory but designed to support consistency and quality across all local authorities, higher education providers and early career social work programmes

Acknowledgements

These early career standards (ECS) for child and family practitioners were developed by an expert writing group (EWG) working with Isabelle Trowler, the Chief Social Worker for children and families, for the Department for Education (DfE). The following members of the group were selected through a national competitive recruitment process for their expertise and experience:

- Laura Eden (then Islington Council, now Newham Council)
- Ellen Marks (Pause - Creating Space for Change)
- Julie Rooke (Westminster City Council)
- Sharon Davidson (independent social work improvement consultant)
- Sophie Gilbert (Birmingham Children's Trust)

In addition, Margaret Mulowska joined the group as an expert by experience (and a member of DfE's national practice group) and Joseph Oakley was selected for his detailed knowledge of the design and regulation of professional assessment frameworks. Rebecca Mulvaney from Social Work England was also a member of the group.

There were a number of individuals and representatives of organisations who commented on versions of these standards while they were under development. This included:

- colleagues from DfE's national practice group, Sal Tariq and Rasheed Pendry
- the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) workforce committee
- the principal social workers' network
- Foundations
- universities
- equalities, diversity and inclusion (EDI) experts and groups representing experts by experience.

We also worked closely with 8 'early adopter' local authorities who shared their approaches to induction and commented on these standards.

Introduction

These new early career standards will replace, by April 2027, the current [post-qualifying standards: knowledge and skills statements for child and family practitioners](#), which were first published in November 2015 and last updated in May 2018.

The early experience of social workers sets the groundwork for practice which improves the lives of children and families; developing professional confidence and competence also supports social workers to stay in practice for longer. The social work workforce plays a crucial role in delivering the help, protection and care that children and young people need, which is why we want to replace the current set of post-qualifying standards: knowledge and skill statements to match the ambition set out in the [national framework](#). The national framework sets out the purpose, principles and enablers of good practice with children and families, along with the outcomes that should be achieved. These new early career standards provide a clearer set of professional outcomes and provide more granular detail on what a new social worker should know and be able to do.

The 6 new standards of the ECS reflect key aspects of social work with children and families, including relationships and communication, assessment and planning and intervention, along with aspects relating to working with other professionals and social workers' progression. There is a separate standard on anti-discriminatory practice which is fundamental to all areas of social work practice, given a social worker's role in addressing inequality and discrimination experienced by the families they work with.

Under each of the 6 standards are a number of outcome statements. These outcome statements define at a high level what new social workers need to be able to demonstrate across the 6 standards by the end of the first 2 years.

Below the outcome statements, the 'learn that' statements set out key things that a social worker would need to understand in order to achieve the outcomes, while the 'learn how to' statements set out the key skills that newly qualified social workers need to be able to demonstrate at this stage in their career.

All social workers in England must meet Social Work England's [professional standards](#). The professional standards are the threshold standards necessary for safe and effective practice. They set out what a social worker in England must know, understand and be able to do after completing their social work education or training. They apply to all social workers in all roles and in all settings. Social workers must continue to meet the professional standards to maintain their registration with Social Work England. The 'learn that' and 'learn how to' statements within the early career standards are designed to build on and complement Social Work England's [knowledge, skills and behaviours](#), which will be embedded in qualifying education and training, within a children and families-focused social work setting. All social work students and apprentices will be expected to demonstrate their competency in the knowledge skills and behaviours in order to meet the professional standards and apply for registration.

Evidence

The new early career standards have been designed to be compatible with the statutory national framework for children's social care, which in turn shapes the practice framework a local authority is using, and the practice of child and family social workers in their various roles within the organisation.

The standards draw on the key theories which underpin the best evidence of the most effective social work practice:

- systems theory
- cybernetics
- social learning theory
- attachment theory
- decision-making biases
- psychoanalytic theory

They have also been shaped by best evidence of the most effective whole-system approaches to working with children and families in children's social care:

- systemic practice
- restorative practice
- strengths-based practice

The standards recognise that people are part of systems, embedded in their social context, including in their family and their wider networks. The standards are therefore relational in their approach, looking at patterns of behaviour for opportunities for positive change. They focus on working with children and families in a future-oriented way, recognising that the people who may be most in need of support can be the hardest to reach. The standards are also based on a belief that families are experts in their own lives and focus on the strengths and resources that they have to create change.

The standards also reference examples of some of the most effective methods or interventions social workers can use in practice, such as motivational interviewing or family group decision-making. This is not exhaustive and the series of practice guides which accompany the national framework will set out best evidence on a range of interventions.

The EWG drew on their own considerable experience of what works in practice. They also drew on the accumulated evidence from:

- the children's social care innovation programme (summarised in the 2022 publication [seven features of practice and seven outcomes](#))
- Foundations' practice guides

- a rapid evidence review by the University of Bedfordshire, [Child and family social worker knowledge and skills -rapid evidence review](#) (which the DfE commissioned to inform the development of these standards)
- serious case reviews
- national panel reports and other sources

The statements in the standards will be kept under review and updated periodically as the evidence base which underpins them evolves and improves.

Standard 1 – Builds and maintains impactful relationships and communicates effectively with children, parents and families

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- build and maintain impactful relationships with:
 - children
 - parents
 - family, networks and carers
- communicate complex and difficult information clearly, always placing children and families as the focus of any interaction

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- children are best looked after and protected by a network of enduring and caring family relationships. Where these relationships are disrupted, rebuilding or creating new relationships is the best protective factor for children
- impactful professional relationships with families which successfully balance empathy with authority are built on:
 - clarity of purpose
 - deliberate, focused practice
 - frequent, honest feedback
- social workers can affect and improve the wellbeing and motivation of families by repeated identification of personal strengths, hopes and aspirations
- a clear life narrative helps children recover and achieve positive outcomes, while uncertainty about past harm can prevent this
- children may maintain strong relationships with people who have harmed them, which creates complexity; they may not recognise they are being harmed and may try to protect the person
- identifying and encouraging parents' strengths, hopes and aspirations for their child and family can improve parenting capacity
- deepening a parent's understanding of their child's perspective and aspirations can help foster motivation to change
- strengths and solutions are developed, nurtured and sustained through the relationship; and problems are located and maintained not within individuals, but between them. This applies to the connections within families, as well as those between families and professionals
- the deeper the engagement with family members, the higher the chance of driving change in the family, recognising that some may be afraid or ashamed to share

information about people they know and trust and helping them feel safe to do so takes time

- modelling how to repair the relationships between the social worker and the child or family is an important opportunity to demonstrate what regulation and trusted relationships look like
- for sustainable change, families need to understand challenges, their impact on the child and what must change
- when children understand and see their family network working together, they feel more protected, loved and cared for and are less likely to feel conflicted
- individuals experiencing stress, fear or limited capacity from domestic abuse (including coercive control), substance misuse, mental ill-health, or learning disability often need persistent, adaptive and creative communication to share and absorb information
- people understand information better when options are presented as early as possible, if this is safe
- timing, environment and context can all affect how sensitive information is received

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- use adaptive techniques which demonstrate:
 - active, non-selective listening
 - empathy
 - responsiveness to expressions of emotion
 - use of language
 - repeated checking that information is understood
- use open questions within a structure of elicit-provide-elicite to draw out and explore the person's experiences, perspectives and ideas to motivate and promote sustained change
- repeatedly encourage family members to practise identifying their strengths and aspirations as individuals and as a whole family, as well as identifying and celebrating every small step towards change
- model through the professional relationship how to divert away from tension, conflict and escalating crisis, offering choices, collaboration and partnership activities; and reduce signs of anxiety, anger or fear by controlling tone and body language
- validate emotions, maintain safety and adjust pace of conversation when relaying difficult information sensitively to children and families
- present information in an accessible, clear, accurate, balanced and persuasive way to a variety of audiences (for example, to parents and the court)
- use a range of child-centred methods (observation, play, activities, creative tools) to:
 - be emotionally attuned to and build rapport and trust with children

- build a full picture of their daily lives, their unique perspectives, wishes and needs

including those children who are pre-verbal, disabled, or have additional communication needs

- undertake verbal and written life-story work so children have an accurate understanding of their story and its impact, aligned to their developmental needs
- repair and maintain constructive relationships through transparency and honesty, including where there has been rupture or disagreement; or when collaboration and partnership have not been possible, balancing compassion and authority effectively
- seek out and build relationships with members of the whole extended family network and connected people, including birth parents whose children do not live with them, to use their care, knowledge and expertise to address concerns, enhance relationships and decision-making
- show care by remembering and valuing the child's perspective and identity, for example, builds and shares memories, remembers important dates, times and the child's likes and dislikes
- maintain curiosity and empathy whilst being transparent about concerns and possible outcomes, adapting the practice approach to account for previous involvement of professionals in private family life where that has caused mistrust, fear or trauma (for example, repeat removals)
- recognise how trauma, racism, discrimination, past experiences with services affect relationships and adapt practice accordingly, recognising different cultural models of parenting and family life

Standard 2 – Undertakes effective assessments to develop a purposeful plan, adapting approach as needed

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- identify and elicit all pertinent information about the child and family's history and lived experience in more complex situations
- analyse and apply professional knowledge and evidence base of harm to inform decision-making in more complex situations
- autonomously and collaboratively lead the development of a purposeful plan to manage increasing complexity
- re-evaluate existing hypotheses and adapt plan as necessary

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- as a child's functioning and biological age might be different, observing them in different environments can help establish whether their presentation is evidence of unmet need or harm, considering any:
 - vulnerabilities
 - physical or learning disability
 - neurodiversity
- as disclosure of abuse or neglect by children is often a non-linear process and requires trusted relationships, encouraging this too early, or firmly, can reduce the likelihood of disclosure
- involvement of social workers in family life can exacerbate tensions within families, particularly when significant harm has been previously hidden or when its secrecy is threatened
- persistent and severe parenting stress is known to increase adverse outcomes for parents, their children and the wider family. These outcomes include:
 - increases in poor mental health
 - conflict in the family relationships
 - impacts on the parent-child relationship
 - impacts on children's behavioural, social and emotional presentation
- child behaviours that challenge, when unaddressed and unsupported, contribute to significant stress for parents or carers, impact on family functioning and are associated with increased economic and social pressures on families
- as it may not always be safe for children or parents to share information openly, triangulation is important to enable holding multiple perspectives and hypotheses in mind, to avoid confirmation bias and unsafe certainty

- different agencies and the family network may hold different information about the same children, who may also present differently to each of them, so sharing and connecting information is vital to spot patterns of harm
- stages of child development can change risk of abuse or neglect (for example, under-1s, adolescents) and certain factors may increase vulnerability (for example, poverty, discrimination, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), trauma)
- different forms of abuse or neglect (or both) impact children differently and the interaction between harm types must be analysed to inform decision-making (for example, between domestic abuse and child sexual abuse)
- parenting capacity can change over time, can be impacted by stress, environmental or vulnerability factors and capacity can be different for each child
- effective assessment does not confuse analysis with descriptive reports and conjecture
- a good assessment analyses:
 - severity, duration and frequency of actual harm (including cumulative harm)
 - the difference between actual or likelihood of both impairment and significant harm
 - causes of behaviour (past trauma and discrimination, cultural, social and economic context, family scripts and patterns of behaviour)
 - potential for sustained change (intent towards the child, understanding of the concern, motivation for change and success of past efforts)
 - protective factors (wider family network and services, strength of relationships, resilience)
- the plan is a tool for improving outcomes for a child and not an end in itself; the focus must be on the child's changing lived experience and not just parts of the plan being achieved
- effective and impactful plans:
 - are co-created sensitively with children, families and their wider network
 - are individually tailored and explain what needs to change around the specific child to improve their outcomes
 - are creative and demonstrate knowledge of local, regional and national resources
 - explain how change can best be achieved in each family and network, considering best evidence on effective intervention
 - link clearly to the assessment analysis
 - have clear prioritisation, realistic actions and tangible outcomes, balancing parental interventions with the needs of children
 - are regularly reviewed and adapted based on measured progress
 - include realistic contingency options, respond to any unintentional consequences and incorporate feedback

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- root normal and atypical child development in assessment and formulation of a family's welfare and functioning
- evaluate the different dimensions of parenting capability and how this might fluctuate considering what support might be necessary at different stages of child development
- use tools (for example, ecomaps, genograms, chronologies) to identify critical events in both adults' and children's lives, patterns of relevant relationships, gaps, intergenerational issues, their impact on the child and the effectiveness of previous professional interventions
- track discrepancies and gaps in the information provided to help identify unmet need or harmful behaviour
- identify patterns of sustained change, triangulating specific, observable examples, comparing the narrative with the data and identifying what might be a superficial shift only
- observe interactions, reactions and relationship dynamics, considering the influence of the environment and identify behaviours that may indicate harm
- prepare and ask purposeful and inquiring questions which elicit relevant and useful information that helps create hypotheses, clarifying strengths, possible harmful patterns of behaviour and opportunity, motivation and context for that
- identify key life transition points and likely stressors and triggers which may lead to future family challenges or relapses
- judge the significance of any adults and children in contact with the child and family, considering:
 - their individual histories
 - any serious criminal convictions
 - previous allegations of child abuse, domestic abuse, violent behaviour, restrictions on contact with children or involvement with children subject to child protection plans or care proceedings
- thoroughly explore all realistic options to secure alternative or complimentary caring arrangements where indicated, prioritising family and community connections
- evidence how abuse, neglect, separation, loss or other traumatic events may impact on a child's future long-term outcomes, including the ability to form relationships and the support they will need to build a lifelong network of love and care
- when that child is a victim of criminal or sexual exploitation, explore the harm they have suffered, the nature of constrained choice, including survival choices and how discrimination and negative stereotypes can lead to assumptions about blame and responsibility

- identify how coercion, responses to trauma and the impact of neurodiversity or disabilities (including mental ill-health), may impact on how harm presents in children and the care they need
- differentiate between adverse parenting due to poverty and circumstances of neglect or other forms of abuse
- assess actual or likely significant harm through an anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and culturally aware lens, applying knowledge of faith, beliefs and family cultures that can positively and negatively impact on children, whilst maintaining a core focus on the safety and wellbeing of the child
- provide a forensic analysis of parenting capacity, distinguishing between fact, inference and assumption, the weight given to different forms of evidence, identifying gaps in information and uncertainties in the analysis
- draw conclusions which follow logically from the evidence
- apply the correct legal framework to the presenting rights and needs of the child and their carers, taking account of recent case-law and statutory guidance
- create plans which:
 - are specific to the needs of the child and include objectives with clearly aligned interventions and timescales
 - prioritise interventions that will have the biggest impact on a child's lived experience and outcomes, considering the child's age and development
 - are informed by family group decision-making
 - ensure family members and kinship carers have access to support that addresses current and potential future needs and concerns, including the need to consider sibling relationships
 - use support from the wider family network, local community, charities, voluntary sector organisations and faith leaders, considering potential strengths and risks
 - consider the family's culture and experiences of discrimination
- anticipate where plans may need to be adapted, taking into consideration a child's timescales, key life transition points and likely stressors and triggers which may lead to future family challenges or relapses
- provide contingencies for:
 - parental substance misuse relapses
 - parental mental health deterioration
 - new incidences of domestic abuse

in the context of the long-term plan for the child, being neither risk-averse nor overly optimistic

Standard 3 – Delivers interventions to support children and families to make positive change, build resilience and support effective life transitions

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- deliver and facilitate interventions:
 - in collaboration with the family to create positive change
 - to sustain change and build family resilience
 - to provide safe alternative care, collaborating and maintaining the relationship with the family where possible
- review efficacy of interventions and progress towards intended outcomes

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- interventions are more likely to result in sustained, positive change when:
 - families believe they will make their lives better
 - they are designed with families
 - they draw on theory and the evidence base, for example, social learning theory or attachment theory (or both) and the science of early child development
 - they are rooted in restorative and systemic principles of practice
- it is unlikely that a single intervention by itself can provide a sustained and long-term solution for serious problems; using a range of interventions in collaboration with other sources of emotional and practical support is more likely to succeed where families experience complex adversities
- working relationally with parents, offering an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, providing information and guidance to parents on child development and health and providing advice and advocacy can help generate a positive impact on family functioning
- support for parents can be stubbornly gendered, both in range and type of support offered and in the workforce. Evidence shows that many fathers and male carers assume that parenting support is not for them or that they are not welcome to participate
- fathers and male carers welcome opportunities to reflect on their parenting role, the perceived tensions between masculinity and warm and sensitive parenting and the co-parenting relationship
- parenting interventions play an important role in supporting parental mental health by reflecting on experience, building parenting skills and strengthening parent-child relationships

- practitioners do not need to wait until mental health treatment begins before offering parenting interventions; they can still improve child and parenting outcomes
- group-based support can provide opportunities for many parents to share experiences, reduce feelings of isolation and build support networks with other parents, for example, parenting programmes can be particularly impactful for many parents and carers of children with diagnosed or suspected traits of autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- behavioural and psychosocial parenting programmes can lead to improvement in parenting practices and parental wellbeing among parent and carers of autistic children and those with children diagnosed with ADHD. These programmes can also improve the overall characteristics of autism and ADHD without a formal diagnosis but who are showing potentially similar characteristics
- effective interventions balance empathy with authority, providing clarity on what must change and the timescale for this change to improve outcomes for children
- interventions are more likely to result in sustained, positive change when families believe they will make their lives better and implementation is organised around a family's needs
- change is dynamic, non-linear, not always easy to measure and parents are likely to experience setbacks, but this does not always mean long-term progress is unlikely
- trauma and adversity affect children's ability to regulate emotions with re-traumatisation likely at stress, crisis or transition points; skilful relational work (labelling feelings, age-appropriate explanations) and continuity can help
- experiencing challenges earlier in life, for example witnessing domestic abuse in early childhood or experiencing in utero or early childhood trauma and neglect can increase the likelihood of children experiencing negative outcomes; offering interventions as early as possible is important to help mitigate this
- supporting children (at risk of) experiencing exploitation to build healthy relationships in their community is important to achieving sustained change
- educational attendance can be an important factor in keeping children safe in the short term and having better outcomes in all areas of development in the long term
- families often repeat behaviour patterns and exploring these in context supports change; the cause of a problem may matter less than what sustains it and how it impacts the child
- life transition points, stressors and triggers may lead to future family challenges or relapses; the social worker and wider support network need to recognise and anticipate them and know how best to respond
- in situations of coercive control, domestic abuse and sexual offending, attempts to drive change in families can increase risk of harm to children; professionals, including social workers, can also be coercively controlled by abusive adults

- in 'stuck' situations, social workers may need to change their approach and framework, for example, the use of pre-proceedings public law outline (PLO), or varying the use of self and authority to drive change
- certainty is desirable but rarely possible; decisions often need to be made quickly to address escalating concerns, adapting interventions as new information emerges
- children are more likely to have a stable alternative home if they live within their extended family, if they can create physical and emotional safety for them without replicating harmful family dynamics
- the longer a child is out of the family home, the less likely they are to return; where children cannot live with their family networks, they are most likely to experience permanence if adopted or have special guardians
- children and carers need support to get to know and understand each other as quickly as possible to establish a good initial relationship and feel safe; sharing information about the child's specific needs, likes, dislikes, routines and emotional state are crucial to achieving this
- family time between parents and children in care or living with relatives, aligned to the child's developmental stage and circumstances, can support secure relationships, stable placements and a more positive sense of self. It must only happen when it is safe

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- successfully advocate for practical resource and resolution to a range of social factors impacting on family wellbeing: debt management, housing repairs, benefit entitlement, nursery provision, free school meals
- introduce to parents the theory behind interventions and how repeated practice can successfully change the approach to parenting and subsequently, child behaviour
- explore with parents how family life impacts on their child's development, eliciting motivation for change and the benefits of safety planning
- support the child and family to understand why having safe and helpful support systems is important, empowering them to build these where they do not exist, for example, using:
 - family group decision-making
 - lifelong links
 - resources in the community
 - the wider family network
 - independent visiting
- help parents observe, recognise and scaffold communications or initiatives from the child so they 'tune in' to the child's experiences and needs
- manage child behaviours that challenge by modelling for parents how to:
 - set limits
 - develop routines

- provide child-led activities
- communicate clear messages
- avoid confrontations
- use quiet time and time out effectively
- use firm limits and distraction strategies
- highlight key concepts and ways of achieving changes for parents and children by offering:
 - skilled facilitation of groups
 - supporting group process and dynamics
 - navigating challenging conversations
 - role-play activities
- use coaching techniques, to provide opportunities and support for parents to practice and strengthen core parenting skills and receive individualised feedback from practitioners (such as through role play, homework and group exercises)
- when working with an autistic child, help parents to:
 - generate social responsivity (encouraging children to engage in shared interactions and respond to social cues)
 - support functional communication (supporting children to use communication methods such as vocalisation to express their needs and desires)
 - support positive social interaction (promoting positive moments between parent, carers and their children)
- use every interaction, however small, as an opportunity for intervention, for example, praising positive change, exploring together reasons why things aren't going to plan
- respond to behaviour that may indicate a lack of co-operation, considering the possible reasons for this, recognising that families may present differently to different agencies
- respond to situations that require intervention without parental agreement and maintain or repair relationships following this, for example, communicating with children alone
- support families to improve children's educational attendance, readiness to learn and mental or emotional wellbeing in school
- help the family to understand each other's experiences of relationships and trauma or adversity, including interactions that trigger negative responses
- show parents how to demonstrate love and care and understand what healthy relationships look like, so children feel more secure and stable and display more regulated behaviour
- explore with families how the impact of structural and systemic racism and discrimination can shape their experiences and family life
- prepare families for future changes, drawing on support from the wider family network and multi-agency networks

- take decisive action in partnership with relevant agencies and extended family to protect a child, including where the evidence is ambiguous (for example, in situations of inconclusive non-accidental injuries in young children, or cumulative harm)
- plan arrangements for alternative care, where indicated, applying knowledge of legislation and procedures, using a child-focused approach and being as transparent as possible
- present to the court a balanced picture of the child's needs, parenting capability, evidence of previous help provided and its quality, to assist the court with their decision-making
- work with carers to manage and promote safe family time with birth and extended families, balancing present and future needs and wishes of the child
- recognise when social care intervention is no longer needed and plan for this with the child and family, demonstrating appropriate endings to relationships

Standard 4 – Explores identity to deliver anti-discriminatory practice

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- gain insight into a child and family's sense of self by consistently applying an intersectional understanding of identity
- reflect on own identity and prejudices, valuing difference and using this to shape approaches with families
- integrate professional knowledge of anti-discriminatory practice to effectively manage more complex situations

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- children feel safer, loved and included when they feel respected, supported and celebrated; this can take on particular importance in adolescence as their identity develops
- children and families' experiences of services can be shaped by:
 - power imbalances
 - inequality
 - intergenerational trauma
 - discriminationwhich may reduce their confidence in engaging with or challenging social workers and other professionals
- exploring with children and families how they see themselves and how they think others see them and why, helps to build relationships and informs assessment and intervention
- some groups of children are disproportionately under and over represented in referrals to:
 - statutory agencies
 - section 47 enquiries
 - child protection plans
 - care proceedings
 - caresocial workers should reflect on their own and others practice to ensure potential bias is recognised and explored
- racism and discrimination take many forms, from overt acts to subtle behaviours
- employers have a duty of care to social workers who experience discrimination on the basis of their protected characteristics
- exploring how families see themselves and how they think others see them and why, can be difficult; supervision helps social workers reflect on similarities and differences between themselves and families

- prejudiced assumptions about sex, class, race, disability, sexuality, religion, gender reassignment, cultural norms, care experience can lead to disproportionate or insufficient levels of intervention
- the personal cost of addressing racism and discrimination differs depending on one's own protected characteristics

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- use relevant models (for example, Social GRRRAACCEEESSS, LUUUTT, AFDiT¹) and tools with children and families to explore how families see themselves and each other, building their confidence and helping them make sense of their shared and different history and experience
- provide feedback, advice and strategies to challenge racism and discrimination, modelling constructive and effective strategies to respond
- draw on other professional and community resources to aid assessment, planning and intervention when belief systems may increase complexity of a situation or likelihood of harm to children, for example, the presence of:
 - significant disability
 - mental ill health
 - honour-based violence
 - female genital mutilation (FGM)
 - radicalisation
 - forced marriage
- respond to the impact of racism and discrimination on children's and families' wellbeing, safeguarding and supporting where appropriate, recognising any experiences of separation, loss of home, way of life, cultural identity, community
- advocate for care-experienced children and young people, addressing barriers (for example, criminalisation of looked after children; school exclusion) by building community links and supporting access to specialised services or national or local procedures, or both (for example, the [care leaver covenant](#))
- use supervision, organisational processes and support to act on racism and discrimination directed at social workers with protected characteristics by families or others
- assess when sharing personal information may be appropriate to help build trusted relationships
- actively develop cultural humility and continuously drive poverty-aware, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice, whilst always ensuring children's needs are met and they are protected from harm

¹ Social GRRRAACCEEESSS, LUUUTT, and AFDiT are systemic reflective practice frameworks used in social work to explore identity, power, narratives, and professional decision-making.

Standard 5 – Works collaboratively and effectively with other professionals

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- work collaboratively and effectively with multi-agency practitioners, providing constructive challenge, where appropriate
- recognise boundaries of own professional scope and responsibility and seek support or escalate to others, where appropriate
- represent the social work perspective confidently within multi-agency partnerships
- advocate for social justice and equity across multi-agency partners by promoting anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices and behaviours

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- the continued building of trusted relationships with all practitioners working with the child and family improves decision-making, openness and constructive challenge, especially in times of crisis
- children and families may struggle to advocate for themselves; supporting and empowering them to do so can have long-term benefits
- effective multi-agency working balances diverse perspectives with shared goals, safe uncertainty and managing professional anxiety, which may involve addressing perceived difference in power or authority, or both
- as effective decision-making is often enhanced when social work expertise is supplemented with other professionals' expertise, sharing responsibility improves safety for children and families; poor information sharing between agencies inhibits this
- some situations require escalation to managers or senior leaders to resolve issues or drive systems change (or both)

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- explore the child's experience and their context with multi-agency professionals by gathering, reflecting on and interrogating information to jointly create hypotheses, clarify strengths, concerns and patterns of behaviour
- assimilate and articulate a range of views whilst promoting the voice and experience of children and families as experts in their situation
- motivate others in the multi-agency network towards new, creative and varied approaches when progress stalls, emphasising the importance of progress for child safety and supporting families to make positive change

- promote action by corporate parents to create access to child and family support and opportunities for care-experienced young people to thrive (for example, access to housing, work, health, enrichment)
- translate between different agency thresholds and help families navigate the system (for example, SEND; child and adolescent mental health services [CAMHS]) and to understand the parameters and different roles within the network
- ensure smooth transitions between services, teams and agencies so families don't have to repeat their story and key information and documents are not lost
- identify when specialist interventions (for example, youth justice, mental health or addiction services) are needed and engage them effectively
- explore what is driving professional anxiety, listening carefully to explore hypotheses, whilst using professional expertise to reach for a shared decision on how to deliver good long-term outcomes for children
- confidently and constructively challenge agencies (including those perceived to hold greater authority) where their action or inaction could cause detriment to a child or family or where responses are not aligned with good practice, or both
- recognise when collaborative agreement cannot be reached within their scope of influence and escalate appropriately

Standard 6 – Reflects on and develops professional practice

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- develop their practice through evidence-informed reflective practice and professional learning to ensure work with families is impactful
- demonstrate under pressure:
 - self-awareness
 - emotional intelligence
 - adaptability
 - professionalism

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- most social work takes place in private and, therefore, an increased level of scrutiny and quality assurance activity is needed to maintain standards
- reflective practice includes self-reflecting on own learning, feedback and practice to identify actionable next steps. This is most effective when it:
 - is purposeful and uses structured approaches (for example, Gibbs, Kolb)
 - is based on real life experiences and feedback
 - is honest and critical
 - is focused on improving practice
 - connects practice to theory and research
 - leads to actionable steps
- ongoing reflection with others (for example, supervisors, coaches, peers) helps the social worker to:
 - examine their actions, decisions and interactions with both families and professional colleagues
 - widen thinking, challenge assumptions and generate new approaches
 - work from an acceptance of 'not knowing' and curiosity to support the generation of multiple possibilities and responses to increase the safety of the people they are working with
 - recognise response patterns, biases and the impact of personal wellbeing that may be affecting their work
 - recognise coercive behaviour which may undermine accurate risk assessment (for example, flattery, distortion, urgency, instilling fear)
- humans tend to use cognitive shortcuts and jump to quick conclusions; critical thinking and structured reflection helps us to 'slow down' thinking, check assumptions and consider possible alternative explanations and approaches

- application of high-quality evidence should be prioritised where possible (for example, as set out in Foundations' practice guides) and implemented with consideration of the specific needs of the family
- research findings can be nuanced, biased or have limitations and drawing simplistic linear conclusions can be unhelpful
- national and local strategic priorities, developments and issues have implications on what a child and family's journey across the service looks like and the social worker's role within that
- a social worker's own identity, experiences, emotions and biases can affect their behaviour and decision-making (both positively and negatively) and can impact on working relationships and the way they work with families

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- work effectively within the organisation's practice framework to ensure coherence in approach across the organisation
- accurately self-assess own practice, identify learning needs and create an effective professional development plan to address identified areas of development
- reflect on own values, assumptions, beliefs, prejudices and boundaries to drive accurate assessment of need and likelihood of significant harm alongside culturally competent, poverty-aware, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice
- critically evaluate the professional evidence base and its reliability, by understanding:
 - different methods of evaluation, for example, randomised controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental and qualitative methods,
 - the difference between causation and correlation and its practice significance
- model positive ways of working at a team, service and organisational level, promoting a supportive and professional working culture
- effectively, efficiently and safely manage multiple priorities, managing own time and workload calmly, escalating, where relevant, issues related to work-related stress, pressure and capacity
- use supervision as well as peer and organisational support to manage stress and help maintain composure even in challenging and high-pressured situations
- develop effective coping strategies and interventions which promote wellbeing throughout career and help counter the effects of any secondary and vicarious trauma
- integrate national and local learning into own practice, including local and national child safeguarding practice reviews, feedback from experts by experience and quality assurance activities

Definitions of key terms

In this document we define a number of key terms as follows:

Alternative care

This is defined as any arrangement that is a change from the child's current care living arrangements (usually from living with one or more birth parents), facilitated by the state. This includes kinship care, residential care, special guardianship orders and secure units.

Children

The words 'child' or 'children' are used when referring to anyone who is under the age 18. When focusing on particular groups with this category (for example, adolescents), we state this in the document.

Equity

This term recognises that people have different circumstances and may require different opportunities and resources to reach an equal outcome.

Identity

This term is used to mean the things that make a person who they are, beyond their protected characteristics. These things will interact to shape the way people see the world.

Families

This term means anyone connected to or important to, a child. This might include:

- birth parents
- foster parents
- adoptive parents
- kinship carers
- special guardians
- blood relations
- people linked by life experience
- anyone else a whom child considers to be important

Social justice

In the context of this document, this term is used to mean the work undertaken at an individual level, with social workers advocating for fair allocation of resources and opportunities for children and families, according to need.



Department
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