

Mandatory reporting criteria (competence issues) for employers

Introduction

The following criteria for mandatory reporting (competence issues) detail what is required of employers if the competence of a social worker they employ comes into question.

The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) issues these criteria in accordance with section 99(1)(oa) of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 (the Act).

Guidance notes are provided alongside the criteria to support employers of social workers to meet their obligations regarding the reporting of competence issues.

These criteria will commence on 20 August 2025.



Mike Munnelly
Chairperson of the Board
11 March 2026

The criteria

1. Employer awareness of competence issues

Employers who are concerned about the competence of a social worker will usually identify a pattern of behaviours and shortfalls that lead to an overall impression that the social worker is not competent to practise. Where an employer identifies such concerns about an employee, they must take steps to assess whether that social worker is competent.

2. Employer providing assistance after investigation has taken place

After investigation, if they believe the social worker needs assistance to become competent, that employer must then provide appropriate support.¹

3. Timing of employer report to SWRB

After six months of providing reasonable assistance (or any shorter period in the employer's judgement of what is reasonable in the circumstances), if the employer believes the social worker is still not competent, they must promptly report this to the SWRB. The report must be in writing, stating reasons and outlining the assistance provided.

4. Action required of employer if social worker resigns/is dismissed during this time

If the social worker resigns during this time or is dismissed for not being competent (whether or not any action has been taken by the employer already in connection with the issues), the employer must also report this to the SWRB.

Guidance notes for employers

Submitting a mandatory report about competence issues does not replace the usual employment process - the employer is still responsible for managing their employee while the SWRB assesses the report. Employers should seek their own independent legal and specialist advice relating to any employment matters.

¹ See Guidance Notes for information on what type of support may be appropriate

An employer who makes a mandatory report in good faith is protected by law from having civil, criminal and disciplinary proceedings taken against them².

Providing appropriate support

The support an employer provides for a social worker to develop competence may include but is not limited to:

- extra professional supervision
- targeted professional development
- coaching or mentoring with a senior social worker

The information the SWRB needs in a report about competence issues

The employer's written report to the SWRB must include³:

- the reasons why the employer believes the social worker is not competent to practise social work
- detail of the support the employer provided and the outcome of that support.

Help to decide whether competence is an issue

We recognise that not all employers are social workers. The attached table provides guidance for those employers by outlining what failure to demonstrate competence *may* look like. The examples presented in the column titled, “**Failure to demonstrate competence may look like...**” are not exhaustive and may not cover every eventuality.

Employers who are concerned about the competence of a social worker will usually identify a pattern of behaviours and shortfalls that lead to an overall impression that the social worker is not competent to practise. It is hoped that the examples provided in the following table will help employers to identify specific competence needs so they can provide the most appropriate support before notifying the SWRB if concerns remain.

The [SWRB Core Competence Standards](#) may also be useful to employers wanting to know more about the competencies expected of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

² Section 38B(6) of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003

³ Under section 38B(5) of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003

Table: Understanding social worker competence

SWRB Core Competence Standard	Competence may be demonstrated by:	Failure to demonstrate competence may look like:
<p>1. Competence to practise social work with Māori</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrating knowledge of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, te reo Māori and tikanga Māori; • articulating how the wider context of Aotearoa New Zealand both historically and currently can impact on practice; • Te Rangatiratanga: Maintaining relationships that are mana enhancing, self-determining, respectful, mindful of cultural uniqueness, and acknowledge cultural identity. • Te Manaakitanga: Utilising practice behaviours that ensure mauri ora with a safe space, being mana enhancing and respectful, acknowledging boundaries and meeting obligations. • Te Whanaungatanga: Engaging in practice that is culturally sustaining, strengthens relationships, is mutually contributing and connecting, and encourages warmth. 	<p>Lacking knowledge or respect for the Te Tiriti o Waitangi, te reo Māori, and tikanga Māori</p> <p>Dismissing or showing little understanding of Te Tiriti as one of Aotearoa’s founding documents. Failing to acknowledge the wider context of Aotearoa and ignoring the impact of colonisation and systemic inequities on Māori.</p> <p>Avoiding the use of te reo Māori or mispronouncing names without effort to improve.</p> <p>Disregarding or invalidating Māori customs, protocols (tikanga, kawa), or values (uara) in practice settings.</p> <p>Failing to recognise the intergenerational trauma Māori whānau may carry following the colonisation/settlement process. Using a “one size fits all” approach without considering cultural, historical, or social contexts. Speaking of Māori as “other”, rather than recognising self as “other”.</p> <p>Te Rangatiratanga – Failing to understand the importance of mana enhancing relationships and supporting individual and collective autonomy. Making decisions for whānau without involving them in the process. Taking a controlling, task focused or patronising approach with Māori clients.</p> <p>Te Manaakitanga – Failing to understand the importance of mana enhancing relationships. Creating unsafe, disrespectful, or unsupportive environments. Speaking or acting in ways that belittle or offend Māori values or beliefs. Ignoring or undermining a person’s cultural identity or preferences.</p> <p>Te Whanaungatanga – Failing to demonstrate awareness of appropriate engagement. Treating relationships transactionally, not taking time to build trust. Failing to create culturally safe, welcoming spaces for Māori clients. Disrespecting boundaries and not meeting cultural responsibilities. Avoiding collaboration or consultation with Māori networks or failing to support whānau/hapu/iwi-led approaches.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding about Te Ao Māori.</p>

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<p>2. Competence to practise social work with ethnic and cultural groups in Aotearoa New Zealand</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges and values a range of world views including divergent views within and between ethnic and cultural groups; • Understands that culture is not static but changes over time; • Demonstrates awareness and self-critique of their own cultural beliefs, values, historical positioning and how this impacts on their social work practice with their clients from other cultural backgrounds. • Critically analyses how the culture and social work approaches and policies of their employing organisation may compromise culturally safe practice; • Demonstrates knowledge of culturally relevant assessments, intervention strategies and techniques; • Engages with people, groups and communities in ways that respect family, language, cultural, spiritual and relational markers 	<p>Using stereotypes or cliches to refer to people from different ethnicities.</p> <p>Refusal to pronounce names correctly.</p> <p>Exhibiting resistance to clients requesting access to a culturally appropriate social worker or cultural supports they require.</p> <p>Failure to engage in professional development to build capability in knowledge, skills and values required to work with people from cultures other than own cultural group. Failure to recognise the self as other.</p> <p>Unable to name or identify culturally relevant assessment processes or seek appropriate cultural support when required.</p> <p>Failing to recognise their own cultural signifiers and that they may not be appropriate for all groups, i.e. touching in greeting (via handshake or kiss) across gender</p> <p>An unawareness of their own cultural privileges and the impact this has on their engagements with clients.</p> <p>A generalised approach to all clients.</p>
<p>3. Competence to work respectfully and inclusively with diversity and difference in practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates knowledge of diversity between and within different cultures, including ethnicity, disability, social and economic status, age, sexuality, gender and transgender, faiths and beliefs; • Demonstrates sufficient self-awareness and is able to critically reflect on own personal values, cultures, knowledge and beliefs to manage the influences of personal biases when practising; • Can respectfully and effectively communicate and engage with a diverse range of people. 	<p>Imposing their own religion or personal beliefs on a client, acting in a patronising or impatient manner</p> <p>Assuming that people within a culture are all the same therefore not worthy of full and careful needs assessment</p> <p>Being uncomfortable with and/or unable to communicate with some groups of people. Ignoring or misinterpreting cultural cues in communication, leading to misunderstandings or breakdowns in rapport and trust.</p> <p>Failing to understand the significance of stigma, discrimination and othering.</p> <p>Using terminology that diverse groups may find offensive.</p> <p>Failing to recognise and respond appropriately to the societal barriers that might disable people.</p> <p>Refusing to reflect on personal biases, such as denying the impact of one's own cultural background on their perception of a client's issues.</p>

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		<p>Letting personal values override professional judgement, such as discouraging a client from accessing services due to the worker's religious or moral views (e.g., abortion, same-sex parenting).</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding about diversity and difference.</p>
<p>4. Competence to promote the principles of human rights and social and economic justice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands, has a commitment to, and advocates for human, legal and civil rights, social and economic justice, and self-determination; • Understands and challenges mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and also has the knowledge, skills and an understanding of how to appropriately leverage those which enhance power and privilege. • Respects and upholds the rights, dignity, values and autonomy of people and creates an environment of respect and understanding. 	<p>Repeatedly demonstrating little to no knowledge of important laws and rights that protect equality.</p> <p>Perceiving clients' challenges as individual failures only rather than connected to larger structural issues.</p> <p>Showing an inability to acknowledge their own power and privilege in the social worker/ client relationship.</p> <p>Long term exposure to trauma or extreme disadvantage or inequality resulting in a lack of action, normalization, desensitization.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding to promote the principles of human rights and social and economic justice.</p> <p>Is unable to make the connection between the environmental, cultural, economic or ethnicity factors affecting a person, whanau or community. AND the reverse which is failing to identify themes emerging from working with individuals that may express a social policy or community failing (also below).</p>
<p>5. Competence to engage in practice which promotes social change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically analyses policies, systems and structures and understands how they impact on people, groups, communities and wider society; • Advocates the need for social change to provide equity and fairness for all; • Collaborates with others to generate new knowledge that will contribute to the improvement of peoples' lives, communities and wider society; • Contributes to policy making to make systems and structures responsive to those who use them. 	<p>Refusing to engage with peers or collaborate to develop plans and reduce structural barriers that disempower whānau and their communities.</p> <p>Being unwilling to advocate for clients with others.</p> <p>Remaining focused only on the behaviour or actions of an individual with no consideration to their wider context or social stressors.</p> <p>Is unable to make the connection between the environmental, cultural, economic or ethnicity factors affecting a person, whanau or community. AND the reverse which is failing to identify themes emerging from working with individuals that may express a social policy or community failing.</p>

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		<p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding about practice which promotes social change.</p> <p>Failing to address the systems and structures that maybe unresponsive to the people who are attempting to use or access them.</p>
<p>6. Competence to understand and articulate social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories, and social work practice methods and models.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates a critical understanding of specific social work theories and other relevant theories and integrates this into bi-cultural social work practice; • Demonstrates an understanding of human behaviour and integrates this into social work practice; • Demonstrates an understanding of and is able to utilise a variety of social work practice methods, models and interventions whilst drawing upon a wider theoretical framework. • Critically reflects on practice and utilises relevant theories and methods of practice. 	<p>Being unable to articulate what informs their practice. Unaware of the theory or practice models and the evidence that support these.</p> <p>Refusal to engage with new learning or models of practice.</p> <p>Denial of the existence and validity of indigenous models of practice.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding to articulate social work theories, indigenous practice knowledge, other relevant theories, and social work practice methods and models.</p> <p>Failure to identify and implement recognised models of practice, evidence-based approaches, indigenous knowledge and theoretical approaches that underpin social work practice.</p>
<p>7. Competence to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can distinguish, appraise and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including new information and communication technology, research-based knowledge and practice wisdom; • Engages in research-informed practice and practice-informed research; • Demonstrates the ability to work autonomously and make independent judgements from a well-informed social work position and seeks guidance when necessary; • Demonstrates effective oral, written and electronic communication. 	<p>Refusal to learn or engage with new systems, processes or information. Relying solely on personal opinion or outdated practice without referencing current research, evidence or policy.</p> <p>Refusing to take guidance or feedback and repeating the same errors or poor judgements without learning from them</p> <p>Showing an inability to work autonomously without work being checked or a colleague present. Not recognising the limits of one's competence or authority and failing to seek appropriate guidance.</p> <p>Delivering poor quality written communication and/or client notes.</p> <p>Ignoring new technologies or failing to use available information systems effectively.</p> <p>Not staying up to date with emerging knowledge in fields relevant to practice such as trauma, family violence, elder abuse.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding to apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgements</p>

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<p>8. Competence to promote empowerment of people and communities to enable positive change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is compassionate, empathetic and respectful and seeks to understand others to adequately assess their needs; • demonstrates resilience and the ability to manage interpersonal conflict and challenges that arise in social work practice; • facilitates and promotes clients’ active participation in decision making; • effectively collaborates and engages with others and works in partnership with clients to gain access to resources; • reflects on their own social work practice to enable people to realise their potential and participate in their communities. 	<p>Holding power over, rather than empowering and working alongside others. Not valuing the experience, knowledge and skills of the client, group or community.</p> <p>Failing to listen and pushing or instructing the client into a course of action or inaction. Imposing plans rather than co-designing them with clients and whānau.</p> <p>Making decisions for clients without consulting them or explaining the rationale for decision-making.</p> <p>Demonstrating anger and hostility if client is unwilling or unable to engage in supports offered.</p> <p>Refusal to collaborate with others. Working in isolation without involving relevant services, iwi/Māori providers, or community supports.</p> <p>Not engaging in supervision.</p> <p>Failing to critically reflect on practice and maintain insight into personal and professional processes.</p> <p>Unable to articulate concerns, seek support and act constructively when under pressure. Unable to demonstrate resilience and engage in courageous conversations.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding of power imbalances and working collaboratively to ensure the best possible outcomes for Whānau</p>
<p>9. Competence to practice within legal and ethical boundaries of the social work profession</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adheres to the SWRB Code of Conduct, any workplace code of conduct and the professional Code of Ethics; • identifies and manages ethical dilemmas and issues that arise in practice and seeks supervision or guidance; • recognises and responds appropriately to actual or potential conflicts of interest; • demonstrates an understanding of relevant legislation, policies and systems which govern practice and performs any statutory duties with diligence and care; • upholds the right to privacy and confidentiality of personal information and informs clients of the situations where the information may need to be disclosed; 	<p>Failing to disclose or manage conflicts of interest. Failing to disclose a dual relationship such as counselling a friend or family member or working in an office where a family member is a client.</p> <p>Breaching a client’s privacy (intentionally or unintentionally).</p> <p>Socialising with clients outside of a work context. Ignoring professional boundaries and becoming overly involved with a client.</p> <p>Posting information that may identify a client on social media.</p> <p>Being unwilling or unable to discuss possible ethical challenges in practice. Avoiding difficult conversations or refusing to take responsibility when an ethical issue arises.</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeps clear and accurate records and ensures these records are made at the same time as the events being recorded or as soon as possible afterwards. 	<p>Cannot recount the legislation that underpins social work practice in their work environment.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding of social work practice.</p> <p>Failing to take accountability of one's own actions with a view to growing and enhancing practice</p>
<p>10. Represents the social work profession with integrity and professionalism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrates active promotion and support of the social work profession, acts with integrity and ensures accountability; • attends to professional roles and responsibilities with diligence, timeliness and care, acknowledges that social work positions carry power and uses authority responsibly; • behaves in a professional manner, maintains personal and professional boundaries and is accountable for all actions and decisions; • knows the limits of their own practice and experience, practices appropriate self-care and seeks advice where necessary; • actively participates in supervision, continual professional development and career-long learning. 	<p>Publicly disparaging the profession and/or colleagues</p> <p>Using their position as a social worker to gain favours, benefits or compliance from others.</p> <p>Working with a client with whom the social worker has a personal, financial, or family connection</p> <p>Not seeking help or support for complex cases or situations which may be outside of their experience and skill level. Proceeding with decisions that have significant ethical implications without consultation.</p> <p>Repeatedly coming to supervision unprepared and unwilling to reflect or engage.</p> <p>Failure to take notes and/or keep records of client engagements and assessments. Acting dishonestly (e.g., falsifying records or lying to clients or colleagues)</p> <p>Failing to perform duties like mandatory reporting of abuse or neglect</p> <p>Failing to report serious concerns, competence or misconduct of a colleague or employer.</p> <p>Failing to engage in professional development to build capability and understanding of social work practice</p> <p>Fails to work within scope of practice and experience.</p>