Digital capabilities for social workers

The Digital Capabilities Statement is a practice framework that outlines the knowledge, skills and values that social workers should have in order to use digital technology in practice with adults, children and families in England.

The statement has been developed by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

The Digital Capabilities Statement is based on the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). It also adopts the ‘levels’ in Health Education England’s [A Health and Care Digital Capabilities Framework](https://www.hee.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Digital%20Literacy%20Capability%20Framework%202018.pdf) to show the standards of expertise that social workers should aspire to.

It provides a framework to:

* assist social workers with practice judgements and decision-making
* support social workers to meet the needs of adults, children or families who use or could benefit from digital technology
* support trainers and educators to consider how to strengthen social workers’ understanding of the role of digital technology in social work.

It supports social workers to meet and adhere to the regulatory standards - *The Professional Standards* – developed by Social Work England, and sector-wide agreed levels of ethics, knowledge and performance in the Professional Capabilities Framework and the Knowledge and Skills Statements for children and adult social work.

## Purpose

Social workers should develop their digital capabilities in order to:

* **Meet professional standards:** Digital capabilities are reflected in several of Social Work England’s Professional Standards for social work.
* **Promote user and carer involvement**: Digital technology can enable social workers to enhance the involvement and participation of adults and children in decisions about their care.
* **Fulfil social work values and ethics:**Access to advice, benefits and services is increasingly online. Big data can introduce biases. Social workers need to be aware of the risks and benefits, and ethical issues associated with digital technology.
* **Enable relationship-based practice**: Social workers can use digital technologies to enhance face-to-face contact. They can help to build and maintain professional relationships, if used appropriately and securely.
* **Connect people to online groups for support:**Social workers can direct people to safe online services and networks can reduce loneliness, provide therapeutic interventions and enhance peoples’ community networks.

## Practice

Social workers should develop their knowledge and skills in relation to:

* **Understand the online uses and technology needs of people who use services**: Social workers should understand how different groups of people with distinct needs, use different online services and technology to support their wellbeing.
* **Deliver services through:**People use the internet to access many statutory services. A range of interventions, such as counselling, are also available online.
* **Ethical decision-making**: There are additional ethical issues to consider, such as an increased ethical duty to maintain data security given the large amount of personal information social workers have access to, and the risk of ‘boundary issues’ as private lives become more public on social media.
* **Online safeguarding:** Social workers need to be able to identify and balance the benefits and the risks of digital technology – and how to mitigate against those risks. Risks include online sexual exploitation, grooming, fraud and financial abuse.
* **Understand legislation and regulations:**Social workers must understand and comply with applicable legislation and regulations. They should keep up with developing policies and approaches.

## Impact

Social workers should aspire to make a positive difference through their use of digital technology by:

* **Developing and maintaining digital professionalism:**Digital capabilities are integral to social work practice and professionals, including understanding how social workers online behaviour can affect professional identity.
* **professional leadership and advocacy.** Digital technology offers social workers opportunities to develop new roles in social work, such as designing and coproducing technology, apps and systems with tech developers and people with lived experience.

How to use the digital capabilities statement

Social workers should:

* Understand and appreciate their regulatory responsibilities to have digital skills
* Develop ‘the ability to use digital technologies and tools for personal learning and development…to support the teaching of learning of self and others’ (NHS, 2018; p. 11)
* Reflect on their skills, identify gaps and create plans for training and development to address them.

## Promoting user and carer rights and involvement

Social workers should:

* Learn about technologies and digital functionalities (e.g. social networking platforms and interactive applications) that they can use to promote involvement and participation
* Ensure that they understand how to use digital technology to share information with people using services and obtain their feedback
* Understand national and local data protection and information governance policy and guidance

### Anti-oppressive practice

Social workers should:

* Understand the impact on people of increasing dominance of digital access to services and entitlements and how to support and advocate for them in this changing service landscape
* Ensure accuracy of information on systems and know the processes for changing errors on peoples’ electronic records
* Advise people who use services about their rights under data protection law and regulations

### Enabling relationship-based practice

Social workers should:

* Be knowledgeable and capable in using secure digital technology for communicating and interacting with people using services and their carers
* Offer choice to people using services about their preferred technology for communicating. This requires social workers to have awareness and clarity of the security requirements that relate to the means of sharing information
* Reflect on how they can draw on technology to enable them to be time-efficient to gain richer and meaningful understanding of people’s life situations - to *know* and *understand* them

### Connecting people to online groups for support

Social workers should:

* Know about the range of networks and apps used by self-advocacy groups and understand how to use them
* Be able to evaluate how people using services can draw on support from online groups and the benefits and potential drawbacks of these
* Discuss appropriate online support groups with people using services and assist them to engage with them, if required

## Practice

### Understanding the online and technology needs of people using services

Social workers should:

* Become familiar with the range of assistive technologies, communication tools and online systems that people with similar needs use
* Enable people to feel empowered to explain the technologies that they use in their everyday lives to meet their needs. This can be achieved through professional curiosity to ask the appropriate questions
* Explain in their assessment and care planning how the human rights of people who use services can be maximised through technology

### Delivering services through digital technology

Social workers should:

* Ensure that they regularly discuss with people who use services any technology that they use and analyse how this addresses their needs in their assessments
* Understand the technologies that are available to assist people to manage their care
* Research the range of online interventions available and communicate these to people who use services

### Ethical decision-making: knowledge and skills

Social workers should:

* Understand and apply regulatory standards – i.e. Professional Standards (SWE, 2019) – and professional Codes of Practice – e.g. Code of Ethics (BASW, 2020) and [Digital Ethics Charter](https://www.ethicscharter.co.uk/) and other guidance
* Reflect on the ethical issues that emanate from their use and interactions with digital technology in their professional and private lives. This reflection can occur in formal supervision with their manager or informal group supervision with their colleagues
* Understand and apply the BASW Social Media Policy (BASW, 2018) and relevant guidance

### Online safeguarding: knowledge and skills

Social workers should:

* Appreciate that there are risks with using digital technology – they should explore them while not making assumptions that some people are inherently ‘vulnerable’
* Balance risks with the benefits of using digital technology
* Understand how digital technology can be used in safeguarding people who have been judged to be at risk

### Understanding applicable legislation and regulations

Social workers need to understand human rights laws pertaining to digital technology

* The Data Protection Act 2018, incorporating the General Data Protection Regulation 2018
* Guide to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
* [UK Information Commissioner](https://ico.org.uk/) website
* Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (2000)
* The Mental Capacity Act 2005 – this is the statutory framework for determining peoples’ cognitive capacity to consent, for instance to their personal data being shared or collected, in England and Wales.

## Impact

This section of the Digital Capabilities Statement explains how social workers can use their proficiency in digital technology to make a positive impact on organisations that provide social care and advance practice and outcomes.

### Professional leadership and advocacy:

The research findings that informed this project’s [Digital Capabilities for Social Workers: Stakeholder Report](https://www.scie.org.uk/social-work/digital-capabilities/stakeholders) also identified new advocacy roles for social workers. These include championing the technology needs of people who use services within their teams and locally. Social workers should also advocate for people who use services to be involved and influence local commissioning arrangements for technologies required to meet their needs. Social workers can also work alongside people who use services, opening up channels for them to be involved and shape the development and procurement of technology.

### Developing and maintaining digital professionalism

Social workers should:

* Should reflect on how professionalism apples to their online interactions with people using services and how their private uses of digital technology (such as social media) can affect their professional identity and reputation
* Implement domain 6 (p. 27 – 30) of Health Education England’s [Health and Care Digital Capabilities Framework](https://www.hee.nhs.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Digital%20Literacy%20Capability%20Framework%202018.pdf) in their professional and private use of digital technologies
* Regularly reflect on the implications of the use of social media and other digital technologies on their professional identities referencing all the domains of the PCF (BASW, 2018), *The Professional Standards* (SWE, 2019), and the BASW Social Media Policy (BASW, 2018)

### Respect for human rights

1. **Uphold dignity and best interests**: When using digital technology, social workers should uphold and promote human dignity and the best interests of individuals and groups in society and avoid harm.
2. **Respect the right to self-determination**:  Social workers should respect, promote and support peoples’ dignity and right to make choices about their use of technology in services. This also means seeking consent to collect personal data, and where allowed by law, informing people before sharing their personal data.
3. **Promote involvement**: Social workers should use digital technology to promote the involvement and participation of people using services in ways that enable them to be empowered in decisions and actions affecting their lives. This can include using technology for feedback, to enable people to participate in professional meetings, plan their care, or connect people to online self-care groups.
4. **Promote strengths-based approaches:** When determining the technology that people need to meet their needs, social workers should focus on the strengths of individuals, groups and/or communities and support their empowerment. Social workers’ role should be about maximising the capacities of people to maintain their wellbeing and safety.

### Social justice

1. **Challenge discrimination:**  Social workers should challenge all discrimination, including those caused or reinforced by digital technology, of people who have the ['protected characteristics'](https://www.gov.uk/discrimination-your-rights) of the Equality Act 2010: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation.
2. **Recognise diversity:** Social workers should recognise and respect the diversity of the societies in which they practise, including online communities and, the different views expressed through social media.
3. **Challenge unjust policies and practices:**  Social workers have a duty to advocate for people who are unjustly excluded from being involved in shaping the technologies that are used to deliver the services that they need.

### Professional integrity

1. **Uphold values and ethical principles:** In their use of social media and digital technology, social workers should always act in accordance with the values and principles of the profession and ensure that their online behaviour does not bring social work into disrepute.
2. **Be trustworthy**: Social workers should use digital technologies with people who use services in a way that is honest, reliable and open. If people are required to use certain technologies to access services, social workers should clearly explain why this is the case and offer choices, where possible. People should not be forced to use technology against their will, nor should they be excluded or made ineligible for services because they are not using technology.
3. **Maintain professional boundaries**: Social workers should establish and maintain appropriate boundaries in their use of social media and social networking sites. They should critically reflect on how the information they share online can impact on their professional relationships with people who use services. They should also proactively seek to enhance their professional practice through technology – for instance for continuing professional development, reflection and engagement.
4. **Ethical challenge**: Social workers have a responsibility, individually and collectively, to challenge the purpose and principles behind and use of digital technology found to discriminate or negatively impact people. This can be done collectively, with support, through the professional body, or anonymously through whistleblowing. The starting point for any challenge should be the ethical considerations, alongside evidence of impact of harm