

Social workers

General competency framework · Professional level · 5 competencies · approx. 75 minutes

How to use this guide

- Focus on these 5 competencies — the behaviours that matter most for this role — not a chronological career history.
- Ask every candidate the same core questions, then probe. Allow around 15 minutes per competency.
- Ask for real examples and use STAR — the Situation, the Task, the Action they took, and the Result.
- Stay neutral, capture what they say, and judge later. Gather evidence on one competency at a time.
- Rate each competency 1–5 against the positive and negative indicators, and note the evidence.

5 Outstanding **4** Good **3** Acceptable **2** Marginal **1** Poor

1. Resilience

Remains calm and maintains a positive attitude when faced with difficult circumstances. Thrives under pressure, remaining focused despite distractions. Quickly recovers from setbacks.

Why this matters for Social workers: Social work is sustained, emotionally demanding work — often involving distress, conflict, and exposure to trauma. Social Work England's professional standards reference perseverance, professional confidence and the need to maintain practice over time. Resilience captures the ability to remain calm under pressure and recover from difficult situations.

Describe a situation where you felt that the demands being placed on you were unreasonable/excessive

- What did you do to help manage the pressure of the demands?
- How successful were you? How do you know (feedback)?
- What was the impact on your performance?
- How did you minimise any negative impact on your performance?
- With hindsight what have you done differently when faced with demanding/pressurised situations?

Tell me about a crisis (at work) you have handled recently.

- What caused it?
- What did you need to do to resolve it?
- How were you feeling at the time?
- How did you manage your emotions? How effective were you?

Give me an example of a significant setback that you have experienced in your role/career to date.

- How did this come about?
- What did you do? Why?
- To what extent were others aware of your feelings?
- How do you feel about the situation now?
- What would have helped you to pick yourself up more quickly?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
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Becomes ruffled or emotional when under pressure – loses control when under stress		Remains calm and collected in difficult circumstances. Keeps control in stressful situations
Takes eye off the ball and can become distracted/ preoccupied when under pressure to the detriment of performance		Maintains performance under pressure. Indeed thrives in pressurised situations
Uses a limited range of coping strategies or maladaptive coping strategies when under pressure (e.g. poor diet and little exercise)		Adopts a range of effective coping strategies to deal with pressure (e.g. manages symptoms, re-frames, tackles the source)
Fails to consider or spot signs of pressure in self		Recognises signs of stress/pressure in self
Gives up easily – does not show tenacity when faced with setbacks		Persists with a course of action despite setbacks – shows tenacity in the pursuit of goals
Tends to dwell on disappointments or setbacks which can interfere with focus and performance		Remains a positive outlook in the face of setbacks and disappointments – sees them as an inevitable part of the process. Learns and moves on
Loses focus when under pressure		Maintains focus when under pressure
Focuses on the wrong things – gets caught up in distractions and loses focus/attention		Manages distractions in the working environment and keeps self focused on performance goals

Summary of evidence: _____ Rating (1–5): _____

2. Decision Making

Understands critical success factors and assesses a range of possible options before making a decision. Steps back and seeks alternative perspectives when faced with unfamiliar scenarios. Willing to make decisions without access to all the information. Considers the implications of their decisions beyond the immediate issue.

Why this matters for Social workers: SWE Standard 3 'Be accountable for my practice' requires social workers to use evidence to inform decisions, address bias, and exercise professional authority. Decision Making captures structured assessment of complex situations, willingness to act under uncertainty, and consideration of long-term consequences.

Describe a situation where you had to assess a number of possible options prior to making a decision.

- What were the options? Which did you choose?
- What criteria did you use to make the decision?
- What were the pros and cons of the other options?
- What was the outcome?
- What was the business impact of the decision?

Tell me about a time when you felt it was necessary to seek alternative perspectives/refer a decision upwards before taking action.

- What was the context?
- Why did you choose to refer/seek other perspectives?
- What challenges did this add to the decision making process?
- How did this help you/impact the quality of the final decision?
- To what extent do you still seek support/refer in this area?

Tell me about a time where you feel you were too hasty with your decision making/failed to consider the knock on implications of your decision?

- What makes you say that?

- Why did you feel you needed to be hasty/fail to consider consequences?
- What would have been the implications if you had deferred/understood the impact?
- What lessons have you learned from this? How has this informed your approach?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Makes decisions without a clear understanding of critical success factors and without clear criteria against which to analyse particular courses of action		Ensures they have clarity on criteria and critical success factors prior to engaging in decision making
Is rather blinkered in decision making – fails to consider the full range of alternatives or to accept that there may be alternative options		Considers a range of alternatives/options when making decisions and objectively assesses the pros and cons of these
Makes decisions without a full understanding of the wider context and the knock on implications		Appreciates the business impact of decisions – understands the wider ramifications and implications
Goes it alone, failing to get support or alternative perspectives where this is required (e.g. in unfamiliar situations/where information is incomplete)		Understands where additional perspectives could support the decision making process and is prepared to seek support and guidance prior to making decision
Fails to apply and adapt learnings from previous experience or trust tacit knowledge when dealing with novel situations		Applies and adapts previous experience to novel situations
Fails to consider a range of angles or the implications of different courses of action. Focuses exclusively on hard facts/quantifiable information at the expense of the emotional/ people aspects of the situation		Considers issues from a range of angles (e.g. cost, risk, impact, benefit, short and long term opportunities, impact on people)
Rushes into decisions – is hasty and often makes decision on the basis of a superficial analysis		Willing to make decisions and take calculated risks on the basis of absent/incomplete information
Shies away from making difficult/contentious decisions. Abdicates responsibility or defers the judgement to others		Is prepared to make and stand by difficult decisions

Summary of evidence: _____ Rating (1–5): _____

3. Customer Focus

Builds effective customer relationships to ensure needs and expectations are understood. Understands the importance of the customer to the business, seeking regular feedback whilst being prepared to say no when needed.

Why this matters for Social workers: SWE Standard 1 places the person at the centre: respect rights, work in partnership with people 'as experts in their own lives', advocate. Customer Focus captures understanding service users' needs, partnering with them rather than acting on them, and being prepared to advocate strongly when needed.

Give me an example of a time when you provided excellent customer service/went the extra mile for a customer.

- What did you do differently in this situation? Why did you do this?
- What makes this situation stand out for you?
- How does your approach compare to that of your peers?
- What was the outcome? How did you know the customer was satisfied?

At times we all fail to deliver what a customer requires. Can you think of a time when this has happened to you?

- Why were you unable to meet the needs of the customer?
- How did you feel about this? What feedback did you receive?
- How did you respond to the customer's subsequent requests?
- What have you done to prevent the same situation occurring?
- What feedback mechanisms have you put in place to ensure customer satisfaction?

Sometimes customers don't really understand what they want or present requests that will not meet their real need. Tell me about a time when you had to ask questions/listen carefully to clarify the exact nature of the customer's need.

- How did you get to the root of the issue/help the customer articulate their real need?
- How did the customer respond?
- What would have been the impact of you not acting in this way?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Is less focused on providing excellent service to customers. Sees customers as a means to an end rather than an end in itself		Provides a friendly, efficient, professional and courteous service to customers
Lacks accountability/responsibility for customer issues. Fails to show personal commitment for resolving customer issues		Takes personal responsibility for customers, prioritising customer satisfaction highly
Fails to see/articulate the link between the customer and the organisation/business. Fails to appreciate the commercial impact of positive/negative PR		Understands the importance of the customer to the organisation/business. Clearly articulates the link between customer satisfaction and business performance
Presents customers with solutions that are based on wants rather than real needs. Is not always honest in dealings with customers		Is honest and authentic in dealings with customers – provides clear recommendations based on insights from the customer
Does not seek to truly understand and ascertain customer needs. Operates more on a "here is my solution, what is your need" basis or focuses more on customer wants rather than needs		Demonstrates a genuine curiosity and interest in the customer. Asks the right questions and listens carefully to the customer to build trust in the relationship and get to the real need
Fails to demonstrate empathy or an appreciation of the impact of their message on the customer. Could do more to put themselves in the shoes of the customer		Demonstrates empathy with customers. Show sensitivity and considers the impact of their message on the customer
Focuses on completing a transaction rather than developing a relationship with the customer		Focuses on developing a customer relationship rather than on completing a transaction
Is not proactive in seeking regular feedback from customers		Seeks regular feedback from customers
May over promise and under-deliver when customers are unrealistic with demands or when requests are not commercially viable. Needs to be able to say no (with integrity) to customers		Will not promise what cannot be delivered and ensures that work with customers is commercially viable. Prepared to say no to customers

Summary of evidence: _____ **Rating (1–5):** _____

4. Collaborative Working

Looks to understand others' perspectives and objectives. Respects different styles/approaches, whilst adapting their own style to enable them to work effectively with others.

Why this matters for Social workers: SWE Standard 3.6 explicitly requires social workers to 'work in collaboration, particularly in integrated teams', drawing on the skills of other professions. Collaborative Working captures the multi-agency dimension that is central to safeguarding, court work, and most adult and children's social work.

Tell me about a time when you proactively sought the views of/engaged others to resolve a business issue.

- How did you ensure that the right people were engaged?
- How did you demonstrate that you had understood their views?
- How did their input inform and shape the final decision?
- What feedback did you receive?
- With hindsight, what might you do differently next time?

Describe a situation where your personal views/objectives were at odds with the team/key people around you?

- How did you react?
- How did you demonstrate you understood/respected their perspective whilst being clear about your own?
- What was the outcome?
- What did you learn about how best to engage with others?

Describe a situation where you have had to work hard to really understand the perspective of another person?

- What was the reason for the lack of understanding?
- What made it difficult to gain this understanding/get under the skin?
- How did you manage this?
- How have applied the learning from this situation to enhance your interactions with others?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Fails to engage and seek the views of others. Is more directive in approach and therefore may gain compliance rather than commitment to action/ideas		Proactively seeks the views and opinions of others when dealing with business issues – adopts a more collaborative/democratic approach to problem solving
Seeks to be seen to engage rather than actually demonstrating that they have heard the views and ideas of others (e.g. by adjusting their path or shifting their perspective in the light of the information gleaned)		Listens carefully to the thoughts and ideas of others and demonstrates that they have listened to and heard their views (e.g. by shifting own perspective in the light of the information given)
Adopts a "my way or the highway approach" – has strong views and may be less respectful of counter views or arguments		Shares own ideas/opinions willingly whilst recognising and respecting the views and opinions of others
Fails to manage conflict/divergent views or styles and approaches		Effectively manages conflict and potentially divergent views to get positive outcomes for all parties. Appreciates the need to work with others with different styles and approaches to their own

Seeks to be understood rather than truly understand the needs/objectives and perspectives of others. Transmits own views rather than questions to better understand		Takes steps to really understand the goals and objectives of others
Adopts a one style fits all approach. No evidence of adjusting/adapting style based on the needs of the situation and audience		Adapts style effectively based on understanding of the needs and objectives of others
No evidence of reflecting on the impact of their own style or of considering how they might be contributing to the breakdown of working relationships		Aware of the impact of own style on others and the need to check out assumptions they make about others and their style of working/needs/preferences

Summary of evidence: _____ Rating (1-5): _____

5. Personal Leadership

Takes responsibility for their own actions. Proactively takes on additional responsibilities and drives their own performance. Lives their own values, actively acknowledges and seeks feedback from others.

Why this matters for Social workers: SWE Standards 5 and 6 — 'Act safely, respectfully, with professional integrity' and 'Promote ethical practice' — define the values base of social work. Personal Leadership captures self-driven integrity, modelling values, challenging wrongdoing, and the ethical accountability that distinguishes safe and effective practice.

Give me an example of a time when you have been required to justify an action/decision that you had taken.

- Why were you required to do this?
- How did you feel about this?
- What approach did you take?
- What lessons did you learn from this experience?

Tell me about a time when you acted over and above what was expected of you in your day to day role/took on additional tasks and responsibilities.

- What made you take this on? What was it about you?
- How did you manage to deliver this on top of your day job?
- How did you keep yourself motivated/driven?
- What support did you need/get? How did you enlist this?
- What was the outcome? What feedback did you get?

What would you say are your core personal values?

- How are these manifest in the way that you work?
- Have you ever had a situation where your values/principles felt crossed or compromised? Tell me about it? How did you respond?
- With hindsight how would you approach this situation differently?
- How do your values support you at work/help you to perform? (strengths)
- How might these values get in the way/hinder you? (development needs)

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Does not hold self personally accountable for actions/decision/performance. May make excuses for mistakes or blame others/systems/processes		Takes personal responsibility for performance and actions

Quickly backs down when decisions/actions are challenged or becomes overly defensive about chosen path. Fails to appreciate the opportunity for learning		Has the confidence to defend decisions/actions – does this without getting defensive. Can provide a clear rationale for actions but can see alternative views
Does as much as is necessary. Shies away from taking on additional tasks or responsibility		Proactively takes on additional responsibilities/ is prepared to go “beyond the call of duty” for the greater good
Is unable to clearly articulate their drives and core values – does not appreciate what is important to them and how this might positively or negatively influence their behaviour and performance		Is self-aware – understands their motives, values and drivers and how these influence their behaviour in situations (both positively and negatively)
Behaves in a manner that is less consistent with their core values or responds in a less constructive way when faced with situations where these feel compromised/crossed		Behaves in a manner that is consistent with their core values – is prepared to take a stand/responds constructively when these feel compromised
Fails to articulate or is not prepared to admit areas of strength and areas in need of development		Able to openly and clearly articulate strengths and areas for development
Fails to proactively seek feedback on their behaviour/ performance/effectiveness. Waits for feedback to be given to them and in the absence of this carries on regardless		Actively seek feedbacks from others on their performance and the impact of their behaviour/style
Disregards feedback from others. Explains feedback away and justifies rather than using it to improve their performance/approach		Responds positively to feedback from others – acknowledges and responds by making the necessary modifications to style and approach

Summary of evidence: _____ **Rating (1–5):** _____