

Promoting Debate in line with BASW Values

Background

BASW gives platforms to a wide range of people within and outside the organisation and social work. Open exchange is part of a democratic society. Through open exchange there is the potential to learn and develop as social workers and come together as diverse individuals in diverse communities.

Platforms can be for speaking or writing through a diverse range of activities, for example speaking at an event, running a professional development activity, writing a blog. (Professional Social Work magazine has an editorial board which develops its own policy so may want to cross-reference with these principles).

BASW is not accountable for people's views. However, we are accountable for the reasoning behind our invitations and how we interact with people we invite. BASW also has an expectation of members that they will follow our Code of Ethics. If there is doubt about this, then our policies help to guide us in a response.

This document draws on the ethical principles from BASW's Code of Ethics and gives an approach to applying these ethical principles to:

- Support decision making about who to give a platform to
- Support challenge if needed to someone who has a platform.
- Enable transparency about decisions.

BASW has a role in providing a safe space for tricky issues to be discussed, for different views to be shared and for people to learn from one another. This will, at different times and in different degrees, include hearing a range of viewpoints. It can also involve discussing issues where there are moral dilemmas, ethical conflicts or uncertain implications, or where BASW has not yet developed a position. Fundamental differences of opinion do not automatically equate with a breach of this policy. Social work has a long tradition of hearing views and taking positions that are initially considered 'unacceptable' but go on to become the mainstream view of society.

It is not for BASW to tell people what to think and say. Instead, these principles are about ensuring that we respect people's dignity and that we do not amplify voices that undermine people's dignity. An important element of this is not demeaning people when talking about complex or uncertain issues. Another element is ensuring that people feel able to be part of an activity and included in this, even where difficult conversations may take place.

Ethical principles

We have a Code of Ethics that states that all we do is based on *respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and other related UN declarations on rights and the conventions derived from those declarations.*

We expect that speakers, written contributions, and contributors 'from the floor' adhere to the Code of Ethics.

Principles that are relevant to the question of giving platforms to people are:

- Upholding and promoting human dignity and well-being - Social workers should respect, uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being. They should work towards promoting the best interests of individuals and groups in society and the avoidance of harm.
- Challenging discrimination - Social workers have a responsibility to challenge discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation or spiritual beliefs.
- Recognising diversity - Social workers should recognise and respect the diversity of the societies in which they practise, taking into account individual, family, group and community differences.
- Challenging unjust policies and practices - Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, unfair, harmful or illegal.
- Working in solidarity - Social workers, individually, collectively and with others have a duty to challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and work towards an inclusive society.
- Upholding the values and reputation of the profession - Social workers should act at all times in accordance with the values and principles of the profession and ensure that their behaviour does not bring the profession into disrepute.
- Being trustworthy - Social workers should work in a way that is honest, reliable and open, clearly explaining their roles, interventions and decisions and not seeking to deceive or manipulate people who use their services, their colleagues or employers.
- Being professionally accountable - Social workers should be prepared to account for and justify their judgements and actions to people who use services, to employers and the general public.

We empower both the Chair and other BASW members to challenge contributions that diverge from these principles.

When inviting someone

There may be occasions when giving someone a platform is potentially contentious. It is important to be considered in our approach, to discuss and examine any differences of opinion and have dialogues with person(s) who may hold or express views which contravene BASW's Code of Ethics. This would ideally be done before an invitation is given.

Before inviting someone, please consider:

1. What is the purpose of the invitation?
2. How does this fit with BASW's purpose in our Vision and Mission statement?
3. How does this person's known views and behaviours fit with our Code of Ethics?
 - **As far as can be ascertained** has the person previously been prevented from speaking at another event or known to express views that may be in breach of the BASW Code of Ethics?
 - **As far as can be ascertained** does the proposed title or topic of the event or views and opinion of the speaker breach the BASW Code of Ethics?
 - **As far as can be ascertained** is the proposed speaker or topic likely to attract attendance from persons who have previously been known to express views that may be in breach of the BASW Code of Ethics?

This consideration would ordinarily be done by a member of the executive who would then advise colleagues or members responsible for the invitation. In the vast majority of cases it will be a light-touch exercise. This may include (but this is not exhaustive):

- Speaking with the person
- Finding out more about the person's background through a reliable search of their publications or speeches
- Speaking to a member or staff member who knows the person(s).

If the answer to any of the questions is either YES or the answer is ambiguous then there should be a discussion between the member of staff and responsible BASW member to review the three questions and make a judgement about the invitation. The decision will be based on a balance of probabilities judgement that giving the platform to the person is better for our Mission than not.

Potential contributors may have expressed views in the past that are contrary to the Code of Ethics. They may have genuinely rejected these views or claim to have rejected these views or claim they have been misrepresented. It is the responsibility of the person who plans to invite the speaker to establish on the balance of probability what the situation is.

The fundamental question that relates back to our ethical principles is:

- Can we give this person a platform and uphold human dignity and wellbeing?

If the person is invited to have a platform, then it may be necessary to take action, such as to address the controversy as part of giving them the platform, to provide some parameters for how they will cover a particular topic or to provide an explanation to members about the invitation. This should be done in discussion with the person(s).

BASW should be careful about judging people, for example because of problems of hearsay and biased attacks or because the person may have made reparation for historical comments.

Any issues should be made known to the lead member and senior manager for the area of BASW involved. A note should be made of the decision and rationale for future use by the executive.

The lead member/ member of staff should clarify with the person our expectations that they will:

- Uphold and promote human dignity and well-being.
- Provide evidence for their views.
- Be open to challenge and discussion.

We may want to ask the person to sign a declaration, if this is practicable and desirable. It may create an administrative burden or create issues of power, and so not be reasonable.

A declaration could simply say that the person:

- Agrees to participation.
- Authorises any recording or sharing of the information they give (and this will not breach copyright or other intellectual property rights or rights under the laws of confidence or privacy belonging to third parties)
- Undertakes to
 - Uphold and promote human dignity and well-being.
 - Provide evidence for their views.
 - Be open to challenge and discussion.

When the person has the platform

Before the beginning of any event the Chair should confer with the organisers to consider the likelihood that any contribution may lead to controversy or disruption. A plan should be developed to deal with any issues, taking account of the available facilities (e.g. can the meeting be separated into two more groups, physically or online, to enable discussion and mediation that will allow the event to continue.)

If someone is given a platform, or contributes from the floor, and then uses it in a way that seems to be contrary to BASW's Code of Ethics then this should be challenged by the Chair and any other BASW members in line with the ethical principles above.

The relevant questions are:

- Do we need to challenge on discrimination?
- Do we need to challenge on unjust policies and practices?
- Do we need to support others to challenge?
- How do we clarify our values in this situation?
- How can we be open and transparent about our decisions?
- How can we account for our decisions?

The challenge should be done as quickly and transparently as possible, making clear the areas of concern. If the speaker or participant does not withdraw or clarify/modify his or her remarks then the Chair should consider adjourning the event for further discussion, using breakout facilities if necessary.

The key issue for the Chair will be:

- Can we continue to give this person a platform and uphold human dignity and wellbeing?

If the Chair concludes that this will not be possible then the speaker or participant can no longer contribute to the event.

It is recognised that in some situations this will mean that the event will have to be brought to a conclusion. However the Chair should not decide to terminate the event simply because some of the participants are unwilling to remain if the contested contribution is allowed. The key question is whether the Chair considers that the contested contribution is compatible with the BASW Code of Ethics.

Any issues should be made known to the lead member and senior manager for the area of BASW involved.

An explanation can then be given to members, and a note should be made of the decision and rationale for future use by the executive.