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# The Social Services Standards

The Social Services Standards (the Standards) are requirements for registered social services providers to meet that focus on service user safety, agency and dignity.

The Standards are designed to achieve the aims of the *Social Services Regulation Act 2021* (Vic) (the Act) and the *Social Services Regulations 2023* (Vic) (the Regulations), and were developed with input from those who have accessed support from a range of social services.

Previously, social service providers in Victoria had to meet a range of requirements under different laws. The Standards form a clearer, consistent set of obligations for social service providers:

* **Standard 1: Safe service delivery** – Social services are safely delivered based on assessed needs.
* **Standard 2: Service user agency and dignity** – Social services are person-centred and respect and uphold service user rights and agency.
* **Standard 3: Safe service environments** – Social services are provided in a safe, secure and fit-for-purpose environment.
* **Standard 4: Feedback and complaints** –Service users are supported to provide feedback, complaints or concerns about service safety.
* **Standard 5: Accountable organisational governance** – Effective governance and organisational systems support safe delivery of social services.
* **Standard 6: Safe workforce** – Social services are delivered by a workforce that has the knowledge, capability and support to deliver safe social services with care and skill.

Each Standard is equally important. Providers must meet **all six** Standards.

The Social Services Standards replace the Human Services Standards and Accommodation and Personal Support Standards from 1 July 2024.

## About the Social Services Regulator

The Act and Regulations create a new regulatory framework for social services in Victoria. This framework puts the protection and safety of social services users at the centre of social services delivery.

The Social Services Regulator replaces the current Human Services Regulator. The Social Services Regulator aims to strengthen protections for social services users to safeguard people from harm, abuse and neglect. Core objectives include:

* protecting the rights of service users
* supporting safe and effective social services delivery
* minimising the risk of avoidable harm in service delivery.

To help achieve these aims, there are six Social Services Standards that all registered social services providers must meet.

# Who must meet the Standards

Social service providers within scope of the scheme must meet the Standards, including:

* child protection services
* community-based child and family services
* disability services (with some exclusions)
* family violence services
* homelessness services
* out of home care services
* secure welfare services
* sexual assault services
* supported residential services.

In-scope providers of social services in Victoria will need to:

* **register** with the Social Services Regulator
* meet the Standards when providing services that they are registered for
* notify the Regulator about certain things.

## Why is registration necessary?

The purpose of registration is to make sure social service providers can demonstrate **suitability to provide safe services** before they offer those services. This aims to better protect service users and prevent harm.

Registration will take place in allocated time periods from 1 July 2024.

When completing registration, providers will also be asked to **confirm** they understand the requirement to meet the Standards.

Unregistered social services providers may also have to meet the Standards through contractual or funding arrangements, particularly with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

# When the Standards start

The Social Services Standards come into effect from 1 July 2024.

Many providers will already have arrangements in place that are in line with the Standards.

The Social Services Regulator recognises it may take time and effort for some registered providers to get things right, and they may not have fully completed implementation of the Standards by 1 July.

The Social Services Regulator is taking a graduated approach to regulating the new Standards. The initial focus is on informing and educating providers about their obligations under the Standards.

Over time, the Regulator will expect organisations to have fully met the new Standards.

## Previous schemes

The Social Services Standards replace the Human Services Standards and Accommodation and Personal Support Standards from 1 July 2024.

If you had to meet the Human Services Standards or the Accommodation and Personal Support Standards, you will likely need to make some changes to meet the new Standards.

There is specific guidance outlining the differences between the requirements of the old standards and the service requirements of the Social Services Standards. See the [Social Services Regulator’s Social Services Standards webpage](https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards) <https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards>.

Supported residential services providers also have specific obligations to meet in the *Social Services (Supported Residential Services) Regulations 2024*. These include notification requirements and minimum staffing levels. Detailed guidance will be developed for these providers.

# Meeting the Standards

To meet a Standard, you must meet **all** its service requirements.

Service requirements outline the actions you must take to meet a Standard. See **How to meet the Standards**.

Registered providers must meet the Standards as far as is ‘reasonably practicable’ for the social services they are registered to provide. In practice, this means a service provider will need to show that they have taken reasonable steps to meet each Standard.

More information is at **What is considered ‘reasonably practicable’?**.

## Outcomes and service requirements

Each Standard in the Act links to **outcomes** and **service requirements** in the Regulations. These help guide social services providers to meet their legal obligations.

### Outcomes

The outcomes highlight what the service requirements aim to achieve. These are the expected results from measures providers put in place to meet the service requirements of each Standard.

The outcomes describe what it looks like when providers meet the service requirements of a Standard. They are goals to help providers align their systems and processes. For example, providers who meet Standard 1 (safe service delivery) will show they achieved **outcomes** including:

* protecting service users from avoidable harm
* considering the needs, circumstances and goals of service users
* providing services that support service users’ health and wellbeing
* ensuring social services are culturally safe.

### Service requirements

The service requirements describe **practical actions** for social services providers to take to meet each Standard.

Service requirements often guide providers to build on existing frameworks.

To meet a Standard, you must meet **all** service requirements.

There is guidance for providers on how to:

* get ready to meet the service requirements for each Standard
* show service requirements have been met
* use indicators of success that show ongoing compliance with a Standard.

See the [Social Services Regulator’s Social Services Standards webpage](https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards) <https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards>.

## What is ‘reasonably practicable’?

Registered social services providers must meet the Standards as far as is ‘reasonably practicable’ in providing the social services that they are registered to deliver.

This means that service providers need to show they have taken reasonable steps to meet the service requirements of each Standard. This includes demonstrating that their systems and processes to provide social services meet the Standards as far as is reasonably practicable.

In deciding what is ‘reasonably practicable’, the Social Services Regulator will consider the following factors:

* the **likelihood** of any risks that:
  + a service user’s rights would be contravened
  + a service user would suffer avoidable harm caused by abuse or neglect in connection with social service delivery
* the **extent**of the impact on a service user if the contravention or harm occurred
* what the registered social service provider knew (or ought to have known) about any harms, risks of harm **or** any ways of eliminating or reducing risks
* the availability, suitability and cost of risk removal or reduction.

By making sure service providers have met the Standards, the Social Services Regulator:

* prioritises the protection of social service users
* encourages a culture of continuous improvement in how social services are provided.

## Accreditation or certification

The Standards are **not** part of an accreditation-based framework.

The Regulator does not issue accreditation or certification to service providers as evidence of meeting the Standards.

Once a social service provider can show they meet the service requirements of the six Social Services Standards, they have met the Standards.

Work done to achieve existing accreditations may help meet the Standards (for example, the RainbowTick accreditation).

These types of accreditations require processes and documentation to be in place, which you may find useful for showing evidence of meeting the Standards.

# How to meet the Standards

Social service providers can start planning for the Standards before they come into effect on 1 July 2024.

From 1 July 2024 and throughout their registration period, the Social Services Regulator expects providers to demonstrate they are meeting the requirements of the new scheme by aligning their policies and procedures in readiness to meet the six Social Services Standards.

To meet each Standard:

* **Step 1: Understand** – understand the Standard’s outcomes and service requirements
* **Step 2: Review** – assess your performance against the Standard’s service requirements
* **Step 3: Prepare** – identify gaps to meeting the Standard’s service requirements
* **Step 4: Act** – make any changes needed to meet the Standard and track ongoing compliance.

To support you, there are information sheets for each Standard. Each includes:

* suggested actions
* useful documents and evidence
* indicators of success.

The six information sheets are available on the [Social Services Regulator’s Social Services Standards webpage](https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards) <https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards>.

## Step 1: Understand

* Build awareness of the six Standards.
* Identify outcomes for each Standard.
* If relevant: note key differences between your practices under the Human Service Standards and the new Standards.

## Step 2: Review

* Review current policies and procedures for safe service delivery.
* Check your processes against each Standard’s **service requirements**.
* Discuss and review service requirements at leadership level.

## Step 3: Prepare

* Identify gaps to meeting service requirements.
* Use the checklists in the Standards information sheets
* Include key documents showing compliance in your risk frameworks.

## Step 4: Act

* Align policies and procedures to service requirements.
* Build in indicators of success and review points to stay on track for ongoing compliance.
* Regularly check how well you are meeting the Standards.

# How the Standards will be monitored

The Social Services Regulator will take a proportionate and risk-based approach to meeting the Standards. The Regulator will focus on the areas of greatest risk, based on evidence and information.

In 2024, the Regulator’s major focus is on:

* educating social service providers about the requirements
* providing support to help providers meet the Standards.

The Regulator recognises that different providers have different resourcing and capacity. All providers must meet the Standards, although they may use different ways to achieve that.

The Regulator encourages providers to put in place review and assessment checkpoints. This will help providers track whether they are meeting a Standard and make any changes needed.

The Regulator also encourages a culture of continuous quality improvement in social services delivery. This should ensure that standards are maintained and improved over the longer term.

## Enforcement actions

The Regulator is guided by principles of preventing harm and addressing risk. They may take enforcement action depending on factors such as:

* the impact and likelihood of harm to service users
* the provider’s approach to meeting the Standards.

There are a range of enforcement actions available, including:

* issuing improvement notices
* revoking registration
* prosecution.

The Regulator may ask providers for documents and other evidence as part of monitoring and enforcing compliance with the Social Services Standards.

# Is there a self-assessment tool that can show me what to do from here?

**Information sheets for each Standard**:

* The checklists in the information sheets on each Standard are a good starting point for providers to prepare to meet the service requirements of each Standard.
* Review the tables in the Appendix of each Standard’s information sheet. The tables suggest documents, other evidence and indicators of success that will help providers prepare to meet the service requirements.
* Available on the [Social Services Regulator’s Social Services Standards webpage](https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards) <https://www.vic.gov.au/social-services-regulator-social-services-standards>.

**Self-assessment tool**:

* under development
* will be part of a set of guidance materials to help providers continue to meet the Standards
* will support a culture of continuous improvement in service delivery.

Contact us

For further information about the Standards not outlined in this fact sheet, contact the Social Services Regulator.

[Email the Social Services Regulator](mailto:Email%20the%20Social%20Services%20Regulator) <enquiries@ssr.vic.gov.au>.

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