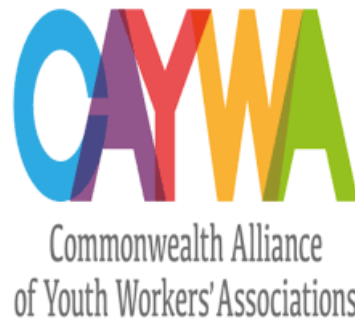


Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth - Guidelines for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice



**A research report to the Commonwealth Youth Program,
& Commonwealth Association of Youth Worker Associations,
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London**



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Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

Table of Contents

Methodology - About this guide

This guide has been written by Dr Tim Corney for the CYP. It has been developed after consultation with various stakeholders across the 53 countries of the Commonwealth who participated in the Youth Work Conference in Malta 2018. Including the CAYWA workshop and focus group on ethical practice held in Sri Lanka July 2018 and the workshop and focus group on ethical practice and welfare of young people held in Malta November 2018.

It forms a response to various Commonwealth documents such as the PAYE goals 2015 that call for codes of ethics for youth work to be established. It sits alongside existing documents such as the draft code of ethical practice for the Commonwealth 2014. It has drawn on previously developed codes from around the Commonwealth and the author acknowledges the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Australia in drawing particularly on their code of ethical practice for the youth sector.

The report has an introduction that outlines some of the history associated with the Commonwealth youth program and the professionalisation of youth work followed by seven key questions for countries to address in order to build a rationale and support for a code of ethics and then 6 key steps for establishing a code within a country or region of the Commonwealth.

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

Introduction – Young People and the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth's 53 member countries have a combined population of more than 2 billion, of which more than 60% are under 30 years of age. The Commonwealth sees young people aged 15-29 as assets to a country's development who should be empowered to realise their potential. Young people have a proven capability to lead change, and are a vital and valuable investment for now and the future.

What is the Commonwealth Youth Program?

The Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) is delivered into the 53 member states of the Commonwealth, having been established by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1973 primarily to train and develop youth workers and promote the active participation of young people in their country's development (Commonwealth 2013a). It is funded by contributions from member governments and aims to: work towards a society where young men and women are empowered to develop their potential, creativity and skills as productive and dynamic members of their societies and participate fully at every level of decision making and development, both individually and collectively, promoting Commonwealth values of international co-operation. (Commonwealth 2013a:1).

The CYP is grounded in a human rights-based approach to youth work that views young people as having an equal stake in society, and sees development as an outcome of achieving human rights. This view is also held by the young people of the Commonwealth as is confirmed by statements contained in the final communiqué from the 6th Commonwealth Youth Forum:

Give young people half a chance and we will astound you, not only with our energy, enthusiasm and idealism, but also with our maturity and willingness to engage constructively in the process of improving our communities and our world. We are often told that as young people we are the leaders of tomorrow. Behind this seemingly simple statement lies a dangerous assumption; namely that young people have no valuable place in today's world. This should not be the case. (Commonwealth 2007:5)

The implications for Commonwealth youth workers are clear: development for young people is a human rights entitlement. As such, youth workers across the Commonwealth take on the role of advocates, facilitating access to human rights, the democratic participation of young people in all levels of decision-making, and partnering with them in the development and transformation of their societies. The Commonwealth emphasises this view by repeating the rhetorical question posed by youth work advocate Chandu Christian: *For what are youth workers if they are not facilitators of human rights and development?* (Commonwealth 2006:4).

What is Youth Work in the Commonwealth?

Youth work in the commonwealth is grounded in Human Rights and uses rights as a framework for youth work practice. Encouraging the advancement of young people's human rights and citizenship – through full and active political participation and engagement with the democratic processes and governance of their countries – has long been a core commitment of the Commonwealth. The Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles 1971 (No. 6) states clearly that: We believe in the liberty of the individual, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief, and in their inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which they live. We therefore strive to promote in each of our

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

countries those representative institutions and guarantees for personal freedom under the law that are our common heritage.

This 'right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which one lives' was re-affirmed in 1991 in the Harare declaration of Commonwealth principles and, in relation to young people, has been built upon and expanded in various Commonwealth forums. For example, the recommendations of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group (Commonwealth 2011:2-3) suggested, in regard to young people's participation and citizenship, that: Youth representatives should be supported to improve their local communities through working relationships with locally elected representatives and other local governance structures [...] All Commonwealth member Governments should establish national mechanisms, such as national youth councils, so that the views of young people can be taken into account in all possible aspects of national policy development.

The safety and wellbeing of young people

For youth workers assuring the safety of young people is fundamental to the good practice of youth work. Many countries across the Commonwealth have acknowledged this in government 'safeguarding' legislation. For example, the Australian 'Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005' Section 5 1 (c) states that 'Those who develop and provide services, as well as parents, should give the highest priority to the promotion and protection of a child's safety, health, development, education and wellbeing'. Creating a safe environment where young people are able to actively participate in their community is at the core of youth work. One of the most effective ways the youth work profession or sector can ensure the safety of the people it works with is to implement a Code of Ethical Practice (Victorian Child Safety Commissioner 2006).

A Code of Ethical Practice helps to protect young people from harm by making clear 'professional boundaries, ethical behaviour and acceptable and unacceptable relationships' (Victorian Child Safety Commissioner 2006:11). This does not mean that creative ways of working with young people will be stifled, but rather that those creative ways can be developed under a set of principles that ensure that the safety and wellbeing of the young person is central to any decisions made (Barwick 2006).

Safety & Protection of Workers

A Code of Ethical Practice contributes to the safety of both young people and workers by providing a clear expectation about ethical behaviour, acceptable and unacceptable relationships and professional boundaries for workers. Indeed, the Victorian Child Safety Commissioner (2006:11) suggests that when professionals '...are clear about expectations, they are much more likely to act appropriately with each other...' and with young people. Without a Code of Ethical Practice, or a strong set of guiding principles, it can be difficult to ensure that all workers are working together to create a healthy and safe environment. If there are no standards upon which to guide good practice, it can be difficult to argue against poor practice. If a situation arises wherein poor practice is observed, a Code of Ethical Practice allows the profession, organisation, and/or worker to ask someone to explain that behaviour. It further provides a standard to inform and guide the pre-service and in-service training of workers and volunteers.

What is a code of ethical practice?

In essence, a Code of Ethical Practice is a document developed by a body of practitioners to provide an agreed framework for practice. This might include a statement of beliefs or values that inform

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

good practice; a formal set of principles that guides professional decision making and judgement; and it may contain an agreed standard of professional behaviour.

The code may be self-regulatory and voluntarily adhered to, or it may be imposed by government or sector-based imperatives.

A Code of Ethical Practice provides youth workers and the wider youth sector with a frame of reference in which to develop ethical awareness, create discussion of ethical issues and implement good and safe practice for both young people and workers.

A code can provide both paid and voluntary youth workers, with guidelines for making ethical choices in their work with young people and it can also demonstrate to the wider community that youth workers operate with professional integrity.

What is the Purpose of a Code?

The purpose of a Code of ethical practice is to guide, regulate and inform good youth work practice. Much of what will be contained in a Code of Ethical Practice may be what is already commonly understood and practiced by youth workers in the field. As such a Code of Ethical Practice is documenting what is current good practice, making sure those practicing are aware and referring to it and passing it on to new entrants and those in training. In order to:

- promote adherence to the values youth workers see as underpinning their profession
- provide a set of principles to guide youth workers in their everyday practice
- assist youth workers to make complex judgements and solve ethical dilemmas
- affirm the public accountability of the youth work profession
- promote public confidence in youth work as a profession.

What is the role of Ethics and Human Rights in a Code?

There are numerous ways to address the concept of ‘ethics’ in a code of ‘ethical’ practice. These may include adopting or subscribing to specific ethical theories or philosophies. However, it could be argued that one of the strengths of the youth sector is the diversity of philosophical and religious traditions contained within it. As such, the Commonwealth Youth Programme suggests that the basis for making ‘ethical’ judgments about youth work practice will be assisted and informed by applying the principles and values based in Human Rights conventions such as UNCRC and working in the best interests of the child (Article 3.1).

Youth work in the commonwealth uses Human Rights as a framework for ethical youth work practice. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR1948), the International Bill of Human Rights (IBHR1966) and as expressed in the Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC1989), young people are considered fully human, and as such should have access to full human rights both in international law and under the laws of those countries that have ratified the conventions. Across the Commonwealth there is increasing recognition of the importance of considering human rights in the ways in which work with young people is undertaken and how youth programs, policies and procedures are established and monitored. The Commonwealth’s PAYE goals explicitly calls for a code of practice for youth workers based in human rights to be established.

Human rights outline the basic standards that are essential for young people to live with dignity and respect. They are founded on respect for the dignity and worth of each young person regardless of race, colour, gender, language, religion, origins, wealth, birth status or ability. Just as we all have rights, we also have a responsibility to respect and promote the rights of others. This is why human

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

rights should underpin the work of youth workers. The United Nations set a common standard on human rights with the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Since then the United Nations has developed a series of declarations, treaties and conventions which outline rights in specific areas (such as civil and political rights) or for particular groups of people (e.g. the rights of children). Once a country agrees to adopt these standards, the government is obliged to respect, protect and realise the rights of all people. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has particular relevance to youth work practice. The UNUNCRC is a treaty for the protection and promotion of rights of children and young people up to the age of 18 years.

The Convention sets out the basic human rights that children and young people have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care, education, and legal, civil and social services. Many of the member Commonwealth countries have ratified the UNUNCRC, and they are obliged to create and amend laws and policies to implement the Convention and must consider all actions in light of the best interests of the child. The provision of services must also be underpinned by human rights as outlined in Articles, 3.1 & 3.3 of the UNCRC which provide a direct link between human rights and ethical practice:

Article 3.1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 3.3. States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.

Perhaps the most definitive declaration on the 'Importance of Young People in the Commonwealth' can be found in the Commonwealth Charter 2012. The Charter brings together the values and aspirations which unite the Commonwealth - democracy, human rights and the rule of law - in a single, accessible document.

Article XIII of the Charter says:

We recognise the positive and active role and contributions of young people in promoting development, peace, democracy and in protecting and promoting other Commonwealth values, such as tolerance and understanding, including respect for other cultures. The future success of the Commonwealth rests with the continued commitment and contributions of young people in promoting and sustaining the Commonwealth and its values and principles, and we commit to investing in and promoting their development, particularly through the creation of opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship.

The recent Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting (Commonwealth 2013) has agreed to the establishment of the Commonwealth Youth Council to further the human rights of young people and their participation in the political and governance processes of member nations. As such human rights is integral to the good practice of youth workers

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

A guide for establishing a code of ethical practice_– Seven questions to consider

1. What is your concept and rationale for a code of ethical practice?

It is important to establish a conceptualisation of what a code of ethics or ethical practice is and a rationale for having one, to be able to articulate what a code looks like and why it is necessary. The process of developing a conceptualisation and rationale will help to bring youth workers and the wider youth sector together to discuss and frame the code and ultimately will motivate them to apply it to their practice.

Concepts are used as formal models or schemas to categorise or define an idea or set of ideas. A conceptualisation of what a code of ethics might look like enables people to have a clear understanding of the language and ideas that sits behind the code and will help to facilitate a discussion about what we mean by ethics and what might be ethically significant to the practice of youth work. Conceptualising ethics assists in understanding the ethical importance of various practices and enables appropriate responses.

A good place to start when thinking about a code of ethical practice is both the safety of young people and the safety of youth workers. A rationale for developing a code may be to assist in the professionalisation of youth work – that is to identify, regulate and promote good and safe practice with young people.

The Commonwealth Youth Programme has been promoting and encouraging the youth sectors in member countries to professionalise youth work and develop Codes of Ethical Practice. This has been based on the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment 2007-2015 and its call for the professionalisation of the youth work sector and creation of codes of practice based in human rights. As such there is a Commonwealth-wide expectation for youth sectors to move towards developing and endorsing codes of ethical practice for youth workers.

In Commonwealth countries a Code of Ethical Practice for Youth Workers is motivated by the importance of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of young people and those that work with them. As such a Code will seek to draw attention to particular International Conventions and Commonwealth member Governments' legislation in regard to safe work practices with young people and to document the values and principles that underpin ethical youth work practice in the Commonwealth.

2. Who will this code apply to?

Who will this code apply to?

Who is the vocation, profession, occupational group or volunteer constituency that will be regulated by this code? A group of people will need to identify themselves as youth workers. If you have a professional association already formed this will be easy but if not the process of identifying who the code applies to can be used to help form a professional association of youth workers (see the Victorian case study on page 147 of the link below)

http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/events/documents/YouthWorkintheCW_9781849291736.pdf

3. Who are Youth Workers?

Youth workers work with young people in a wide variety of settings; such as non-government organisations, local governments or government departments, for schools, for small community organisations and for large charities. Youth workers may undertake a range of service delivery functions as well as ancillary work such as policy, research and management; they are “an agent of change – whether that is in the field or on a policy level” (CYP 2006).

Some people may argue that youth work is dependent upon qualification as a youth worker, and the Commonwealth certainly encourages all youth workers to be formally trained in youth work. However, currently a number of people employed or volunteering as youth workers are not vocationally trained as youth workers and many have no formal qualifications. Therefore, youth workers are either trained as youth workers or they practice youth work.

“Often, youth workers are perceived as those whose role it is to keep young people out of the way, provide recreation and fun for them and generally keep young people off the streets. There is little understanding and even less appreciation that Youth work is a distinctive field of practice and a highly demanding professional skill which carries with it considerable responsibilities and pressures” (CYP 2006).

Given the diverse range of work, training and expertise in the youth work field, it is difficult to arrive at a simple definition of youth work. However, there are a number of factors that make youth work unique: Youth work is the only profession with a discrete focus on the age 15-29 and youth workers must have a specialist knowledge of the developmental characteristics of young people. Youth work considers youth in the context of broader issues and is not narrowly problem focused. Youth work considers the development of the whole person. Youth workers have a range of knowledge of generic and specialist community services such as law, health, schooling and the family.

4. What are Youth Work Values & Principals?

Youth work has universal principles and values such as the ‘voluntary participation’ of young people, the ‘best interests’ of young people, ‘do no harm’ to young people, ‘primary consideration’ of young people. Youth work around the world is often characterised by concepts such as, youth rights, youth empowerment, youth agency and youth participation.

Professions are founded on the basis of values. These values are broader than the codes of practice or rules of association that regulate membership, and are values that transcend the ever-changing context of day to day professional practice. The Australian National Youth Work Training Project (1997) found that values were considered critical and fundamental to underpinning good youth work practice and are an area of training that youth workers said they needed in order to be able to work effectively. This includes “understanding what values are, one’s own values, young people’s values, community values, agency values, the values of other organisations and the impact of values on determining the approach to working with young people” (NYTP 1997:6). Thus the inclusion of youth work values in a code of ethical practice is imperative.

There are values that are quite specific to, and underpin, youth work practice (Corney 2003 & 2004, 2014). The following is suggested as a starting point:

The young person is the “**primary consideration**” of the youth worker. Consistent with the UNCRC Article 1, the ‘primary consideration’ and constituency of the youth worker is the young people with whom they engage. Where conflicts exist between obligations to one young person and another, it is resolved in ways that avoid harm and continue to support the person least advantaged by the

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

resolution. The term ‘primary consideration’ maybe substituted for the following alternatives – Primary client, partner, person, relationship, stakeholder, or agent. Also note the Commonwealth is using the concept of the young person as an ‘active partner’ to convey similar notions.

5. What are Youth work competencies?

The Commonwealth have determined some core competencies that professional youth workers should possess. Since 1973 the Commonwealth Youth Programme has offered training in Youth Development Work. The generic core competencies of Commonwealth youth workers are organised under three main functions.

Enabling - is about creating the conditions in which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than relying on other people and especially professionals to do things for them.

Ensuring - is about operating in accordance with the value systems which give a sense of purpose and meaning to how young people use their skills and knowledge.

Empowering - is about putting democratic principles into action in the fullest sense, so that young people can play an assertive and constructive part in the decision-making that affects them at different levels of society. These competencies are not value free. They are rooted in the Commonwealth values as set out in the 1971 Singapore Declaration of Commonwealth Principles and the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration. Specifically, these are democracy, liberty, justice and equity (CYP 2006).

Some countries include ‘**cultural competencies**’ in their codes contextualising them to the particular cultural knowledge that youth workers must have to undertake culturally appropriate youth work. Such as New Zealand’s Code of Ethics. See link <http://www.arataiohi.org.nz/code>

6. Who are young people?

In identifying which occupational category the code will apply to it will also be important to think about how young people are defined. The Commonwealth acknowledges that what defines or determines what a young person is can be influenced by a variety of factors such as, culture, ethnicity and social context to name a few. However age is a dominating factor in any definition. The Commonwealth has adopted the definition of a young person as being aged between 15 and 29 years.

7. What is the youth sector?

Many Commonwealth countries have a sector that is focussed on young people and is a part of their national social and human development frameworks. It comprises those agencies – organisations, programs and workers, government and non-government, paid and unpaid – who work with, or to the benefit of, young people as a significant part of their work. It includes volunteer and paid work in areas of youth development, face to face youth work, management of service delivery, advocacy, research, training, evaluation and policy formation. Those working in the youth sector possess a variety of skills, experiences and qualifications and the sector includes, but is not confined to, professionals who have formally trained in youth work. Most importantly, a significant proportion of the sector’s work involves working with or to the benefit of young people.

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

A Pathway to establishing a code – six steps

Once you have answered the above questions and established a rationale for a code of ethical practice the following steps will help in bringing the code to life and establishing it widely with youth workers and the youth sector.

Step 1 - Consult: with the sector

For a code to be representative of the interests and diversity of youth workers and the youth sector it will be important to consult as widely as possible. Start by calling a meeting and bringing the relevant parties together that have a stake in determining a code of practice/ethics for youth work.

This could include the following: youth workers - paid or voluntary, youth organisations, employers of youth work, funders or sponsors of youth work, government youth ministries or departments, faith based organisations that provide or undertake youth work.

Step 2 - Identify: Values, principles and competencies underpinning good practice

What are your underpinning values?

Once you have the various stakeholders together ask them to identify the core values that underpin and or constitutes good youth work and that guide everyday practice decisions. What role will human rights play in your code? A good starting place for discussion is to ask participants - what is their view of young people – is it strengths based or deficit based? Are you people seen as a resource or as a problem?

What are your principles of good practice?

Identify what principles assist youth workers in their practice and what will help workers determine difficult judgements about practice.

A principle is defined as a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of behaviour, norms, or rules, which represent what is desirable and positive for a profession. Principles a profession in determining the bases of good practice.

In Victoria, Australia, the youth affairs council and the professional association of youth workers established the following principles that underpin and guide good youth work practice (YACVic 2007 p.3)

‘Youth workers will work towards enabling and ensuring: 1. the empowerment of all young people 2. Young people’s participation 3. Social justice for young people 4. The safety of young people 5. Respect for young people’s human dignity and worth 6. Young people’s connectedness to important people in their lives, such as family and community 7. Positive health and wellbeing outcomes for young people 8. The positive transitions and healthy development of young people’.

Please the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria online for more information

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Uploads/The-Code-of-Ethical-Practice.pdf>

In some countries the principle of ‘self-care’ of the youth worker has been emphasised in the code of ethical practice. This is the idea that ethical youth work practice is consistent with preserving the health of youth workers. This means that youth workers need to prioritise the practice of self-care as

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

a means to assure longevity of career and continued high quality service provision to young people. For example:

Step 3 – Determine Boundaries:

Determine what the boundaries to practice are, and what may be considered to be outside the boundaries of good practice, what is it that workers should do and should not do?

In Scotland the youth sector body and youth work practitioners have come together to determine a list of things that determine unacceptable youth work practices, such as:

‘Invading the privacy of young people when they are toileting or showering, changing or dressing. Inappropriate physical or sexually provocative games. Sharing sleeping accommodation with an individual young person. Making sexually suggestive comments about or to young person even in fun. Inappropriate and intrusive touching of any form. Scapegoating, ridiculing, favouritism or exclusion. Allowing inappropriate, sexualised or discriminatory language to remain unchallenged. Any form of physical punishment. Bullying, racism, or sectarianism of any form, including name calling or constant criticism’.

Please see Youth Scotland, Youth Work Essentials online for more information

<http://www.youthworkessentials.org/safe-sound/policies-procedures/code-of-conduct.aspx>

In other countries unacceptable behaviour extends beyond face to face youth work to areas of financial mismanagement and corruption, highlighting good practices such as honesty, integrity and transparency in the management of youth work programs and services.

Step 4 - Draft:

Take this information and draft a statement or code that you present to the youth sector and to stake holders for feedback and ultimately to endorse and implement. Please see the links provided below to a number of codes of ethics from across the commonwealth that can be used as guides to developing your own code.

Step 5 - Disseminate:

Take the draft code and disseminate as widely as possible asking people to apply the code to their practice settings and feedback the results. You may want to produce guides or work sheets for practitioners and organisations to help them use the code.

The youth affairs council of Victoria produced a ‘how to guide’ to enable workers establish the code in their organisations. See the link <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Uploads/YACVic-code-poster-FINAL-August-2016-web.pdf>

They have also produced 8 implementation work sheets to help youth workers and organisations use the code and to assist with the implementation of the code into youth organisations everyday practice in particular areas, see below links.

1. [How to include the Code in staff and volunteer recruitment and induction](#)
2. [How to include the Code in staff and volunteer supervision](#)
3. [How to include the Code in contracting, funding and partnership agreements](#)
4. [How to make the Code part of your organisation](#)

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

5. [How your organisation can commit to the Code](#)
6. [Legal responsibilities when working with young people](#)
7. [How to challenge unethical behaviour](#)
8. [How to make the Code relevant to young people](#)

Step 6 - Review:

In 12 months review the feedback on the code from practitioners and others in the sector. Make adjustments or additions to the code. Set a time in the future to review it again. This will keep the code relevant to the settings that youth workers find themselves in.

Professionalising Youth Work in the Commonwealth – A Guide for Establishing a Code of Ethical Practice. T Corney

Please see a list of current codes of ethics, codes of practice and codes of conduct from across the commonwealth that may assist the development of your own code.

Commonwealth

https://youthworkalliance.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/draft-international-code-of-ethical-practice-2014_v1.pdf

Scotland

<http://www.youthworkessentials.org/safe-sound/policies-procedures/code-of-conduct.aspx>

Singapore

<https://www.youthwork.sg/standards/>

<https://www.youthwork.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Code-of-Ethical-Practice-YWAS.pdf>

England

http://www.nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Ethical_conduct_in_Youth-Work.pdf

<https://iyw.org.uk/code-of-ethics/>

Canada

<https://www.oacyc.org/code-of-ethics>

<http://www.cycaa.com/about-us/code-of-ethics/>

Australia

<https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Uploads/The-Code-of-Ethical-Practice.pdf>

<http://www.youthworkwa.org.au/site-content/Code-of-Ethics-Youth-Workers-WA.pdf>

New Zealand

<http://www.arataiohi.org.nz/images/uploads/general/CoE2.pdf>

FICE Europe

<http://www.ances.lu/index.php/fice/sarajevo-2006/69-a-code-of-ethics-for-people-working-with-children-and-young-people>

Malta

http://cdn02.abakushost.com/agenzijazghazagh/downloads/Code_of_Ethics.pdf