

Ethical Policy

What does 'ethical' mean?

If something is ethical, it is the right thing to do. Thinking about things ethically means thinking about whether something is right or wrong.

This Ethical Policy sets out what Skillnet believes is right and good. It should be used as a guide on how we work with people, the resources we use and the partnerships we make. The Policy relates to all aspects of our work. It has been developed with feedback from people we support, our workforce and Board of Directors. It should be reviewed every year.

This Policy is important because it affects all the work that we do in Skillnet. It influences, and is supported by, our vision and mission. Skillnet's commitment to working ethically is reflected in the inclusion of a Director of Ethics on both the Board of Directors and within the Central Team.

The difference between Ethics and Morals

Ethics, or an ethical policy, is a guide to what an organisation or group believes is the right thing to do. Skillnet's Ethical Policy is based on values that Skillnet believes are important to achieve our vision of equality for people with learning difficulties.

Morals are what people personally believe are right or wrong. They can be based on religion, culture and how we are brought up.

People at Skillnet do not have to personally believe in everything in the Policy, or do what it says in their personal life. However, it is important that people follow the Policy while in Skillnet. This includes people we support, Skillnet workforce, freelance contractors, volunteers and Board members. The way in which Skillnet projects and groups run must also reflect the Policy. However, Skillnet recognises

and supports the right of individuals to make their own choices and decisions outside of Skillnet. This is reflected in other Skillnet Policies.

Skillnet works with people with learning difficulties. Why does this Policy include other groups?

Skillnet believes that it is important to give people with learning difficulties the opportunity to develop and explore their own morals and responsibilities in relation to the wider world. For many years, people with a learning difficulty have not had the opportunity or education to be involved in politics or influencing the world around them. People have been segregated in groups with just one thing in common, that they have a learning difficulty. The People First and Valuing People Now movements have helped people to fight for their rights and for personalised support to live the lives they choose. However, this has meant that some people have only had the opportunity to think about themselves, not about the wider society and world they live in.

In our experience, many people with a learning difficulty who have been supported to think about their values naturally care about the lives of other people, animals and the environment they live in. Many people want to speak up for other groups facing injustice or that are not being treated equally. A key principle of Skillnet is that people with learning difficulties should not be treated as needing charity. People with learning difficulties have the power to effect positive change and should be valued. By working to achieve positive change for other, less powerful, groups, people with learning difficulties gain more power.

What does Skillnet believe is right?

Equality – making sure that people have the same opportunities to speak up, make choices and become powerful and influential. This includes equality in learning, housing, work, health, money, travel, leisure and relationships. People with learning difficulties are one of the most disadvantaged groups, facing great inequality and a lack of opportunities. Therefore, our priority is to work alongside people with learning difficulties.

Skillnet also works in a way that supports and encourages people to think about equality for other disadvantaged, or less powerful, groups and not just those with a learning difficulty. This is important as it helps people to be more aware and engaged in the world around them.

Some people, including some members of Skillnet, have more power in some areas than other people. It is important that we see this power as a privilege and use it wisely to improve equality, rather than to exploit those with less power.

Valuing people - the first things we should see in a person are their humanity, qualities, abilities and potential. Understanding any impairment they may have is very important, but secondary.

Inclusivity - it is society that often holds people back, not their disability. It is possible to organise society and change attitudes so that someone with a learning difficulty can play a full part, and therefore not be disabled.

People with a learning difficulty/disability are one of the most isolated groups. This is partly due to the historic segregation of the support provided for people. We aim to lead the way by working with and for the wider community as much as possible.

Co-production - when people with and without learning difficulties work together equally, everyone benefits. We work *with* people, not *for* people. We call this *Co-production*. We aim to co-produce wherever possible.

Personalisation - everything we do to support a person should be shaped by who they are as an individual – their hopes, dreams, gifts, skills and potential. If someone wants support to do something that contradicts Skillnet’s ethical policy, Skillnet will support that person to explore alternative support. This is because Skillnet respects people’s individual choices, but if those choices go against our core values, receiving support elsewhere may be more appropriate. For example, Skillnet would not support someone to do something that took away someone else’s right to be valued.

Sustainability – Our way of working should support the long-term well-being of society, the economy and the environment. We aim to “meet the needs of the present without preventing future generations from meeting their own needs” ([World Commission on Environment and Development](#)).

We want our work to have a positive impact long into the future, not just for now. Our work should not cause harm now or in the future.

Respect and compassion – All beings should be free to live a life safe

from harm. We should extend this respect to all living things, not just humans. This means working in a way that protects humans, animals and other non-human life.

We encourage people to consider how their actions affect the world around them. We encourage discussion and debate around ethical issues. It is important that we give people the opportunity to express their personal beliefs (freedom of speech) even if they are different to our own, or Skillnet's, beliefs, providing they do not cause harm to others.

Collaboration - support given to people is most effective when the people and organisations giving it work closely together. We value co-working over competition. We build [partnerships](#) and share resources with organisations whose values are like ours. Our quality and excellence are motivated by our commitment to people.

Sometimes we might need to consider working with an organisation or funder which does not have the same values and way of working as us. This is a decision we will consider very carefully to make sure that we work in a way that is best at the time. See the section below on "Making an Ethical Decision".

Not-for-profit - social goals are more likely to be achieved if there is no profit motive. This does not mean we should not make money from the work we do; it means that no individual should benefit from any profit made. We therefore put all our profit back into supporting the work we do. This saves our customers and funders the cost of private profits. We believe in rewarding employees with fulfilling work, a fair, [living wage](#) and employment terms and conditions that value their family and social lives.

Progression – we support people to work towards and achieve their goals and develop their skills and interests. This includes the people we support, as well as our employees.

Health and Safety – Protecting people's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing is essential. We work in a way that protects people's independence and choice, and encourages shared responsibility for health and safety.

Sometimes we might have to make a difficult decision and take away someone's personal choice if it is essential for protecting their safety. For example, someone we support might be addicted to alcohol which is causing them physical and mental harm. They might want support to go for a drink after work, or to celebrate at a colleague's leaving party. To protect their health, we might need to refuse this support. We would discuss this decision with the person and seek their agreement in the first instance.

We take these decisions very seriously Our Safeguarding Policies cover this in more detail.

Positive campaigning – We campaign in a way that tells people what we want. For example, “Support parents with learning difficulties!” should be used instead of “Stop taking people’s children into care!”.

It is important to try to understand and hear all sides of an argument and the reasons why people might disagree with our values and beliefs; working with people or organisations, rather than against them, where we want change to occur. We believe this is the most effective way of making a lasting positive change.

How to make an ethical decision

It is not always obvious whether something is ethical. For example, buying something might not seem like it is hurting anyone, but someone or something might have been hurt to make it. To make an ethical decision, it is important to think about everyone and everything that might be affected.

Skillnet has always carefully considered who we will work with or accept funding from. When we work with another organisation or a funder we want to promote them and celebrate their work and support, the same as we would want them to do with us. If we feel that the work of a potential partner or organisation is unethical in some way, it is important that we take the time to decide whether we need or want to work with them.

Below is a guide to making the right decision in applying for funding or developing a new partnership -

1. When applying for funding or developing a new partnership with another organisation, please refer to the Funding Application Procedure in the first instance.

Within this procedure, section 6 states -

"Does the funder meet our Ethical standards?"

We only accept funding from organisations and Trusts that meet our Ethical and Environmental Policies, except in exceptional circumstances.... if in doubt, contact the Director of Ethics (Louise Allen) before beginning your application. "

2. In the instance that someone consults Louise on a funding or partnership decision (e.g. if the ethics of the organisation or funder are in question), Louise will

feed into, or facilitate a discussion with the Project Lead(s) developing the partnership/bid and aim. The discussion will address any concerns and identify any conflict of values, along with identifying the need and benefits of the project or partnership.

3. If it is still unclear as to how we should proceed, e.g. if those involved are not in agreement or there is still a conflict of values, Louise will put forward the discussion to the Board's Ethics sub-group (Louise Allen – Director of Ethics, Matt Clifton – Chief Executive, Tina Walker – Non Executive Director, Richard Murrells – Non Executive Director). The sub-group will discuss the issue and make a decision on whether to proceed with the application or partnership. If the sub-group is not unanimous in its decision, a vote will be taken on how to proceed. We will only proceed with a funder if three out of the four sub-group members approve it. If a sub-group member feels strongly the decision taken is wrong, and it is reasonably felt the decision is big enough (which means the funding is large, or the decision changes how we make other decisions), that member has a right of appeal to the Board of Directors to review the decision.

4. In the instance that the decision is made to proceed with a partnership/bid, conditions may be suggested or enforced by the ethics sub-group to ensure that Skillnet's values are upheld. For example, this may include strict wording in press releases or additional training included as part of the bid or partnership.

What resources can we use to help us make an ethical decision?

Ethical Consumer – Ethical Consumer is a social enterprise that researches companies and organisations to find out how ethical they are. Ethical Consumer produces reports on these companies and scores them on different ethical issues using Ethiscore. We use this as a first stage of making many ethical decisions as it helps us to compare different suppliers, funders and potential business partners.

Useful websites – There are many websites with information about issues covered in this Policy, including protecting the environment, animals and people. We are currently developing a list of useful websites.

Co-production – All of our work in Skillnet affects people with learning difficulties/disabilities. This means that all important decisions we make in the organisation should be made with people with and without learning difficulties.

Discussion and debate – We believe that it is valuable to discuss any difficult ethical situations. This helps us to think about different effects that may come from the final decision. Talking to other people can help us see an alternative perspective. Sometimes it might be best to discuss a situation with the person you are supporting, your line manager, or your project team. Think about what you believe is right and wrong, who and what will be affected, what does Skillnet believe in, could anybody or anything be harmed?

The Mental Capacity Act – This law aims to protect people who are vulnerable and unable to make informed decisions relating to their safety or the safety of others. It is an important Act to be aware of as it relates to our Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Policy in situations where it may be necessary to make a decision for someone we support to protect them, or another person. Ensuring people's independence and choice is a very important value of Skillnet, and so understanding how this might be challenged in our work is important.

Skillnet Policies - Make sure you refer to the Code of Practice and Safeguarding and Confidentiality Policies if you have any concerns about someone's safety or well-being.

Related Skillnet Group Policies/Procedures:

Environmental Policy
Code of Practice
Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults
Safeguarding Young People and Children
Funding Application Procedure
Acceptable IT Use Policy

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