



Professional Standard 9 – Client Engagement and Service Delivery (Summary)

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1. Purpose

This Professional Standard sets out the mandatory requirements WAFA Members must meet when working with clients—defined as handlers or prospective handlers of assistance, therapy, or working animals. The standard is designed to ensure clients are treated ethically, respectfully, and inclusively, and to safeguard their rights, safety, autonomy, and dignity throughout their engagement with WAFA-certified services.

2. Scope

This standard applies to all WAFA Members, including their trainers, assessors, peer mentors, and support personnel providing services to clients who access working animal programs for disability, health, therapeutic, or support purposes. It applies across all service delivery modes, including in-person, remote, volunteer-based, or fee-based services.

3. Standard Statement

All WAFA Members must deliver services that uphold client rights, promote safety and welfare, enable meaningful choice and participation, and operate with transparency, accessibility, and cultural safety. Service delivery must be trauma-informed, client-centred, and free from coercion, discrimination, or conflict of interest.

4. Definitions

- **Informed Consent** - Voluntary agreement to participate in services, given with full understanding of the purpose, risks, rights, and alternatives, and documented where required.
- **Supported Decision-Making** - An approach that helps clients make their own decisions using tools, people, or processes, rather than having decisions made for them.
- **Cultural Safety** - A respectful, inclusive environment where clients feel safe, valued, and free to express their identity and beliefs without discrimination.
- **Trauma-Informed Practice** - A service approach that recognises the effects of trauma and prioritises safety, choice, and empowerment to prevent re-traumatisation.
- **Conflict of Interest** - A situation where personal, financial, or professional interests may interfere with a member's obligation to act in the client's best interest.
- **Accessibility** - The removal or reduction of barriers so all clients can understand, participate in, and benefit from services, regardless of disability or background.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

- **Board:** Responsible for governance, setting strategic direction, risk management, financial oversight, and compliance with WAFA standards.
- **Senior Leadership:** Implements board policies and manages day-to-day operations.
- **Staff and Volunteers:** Support organisational objectives under leadership direction and adhere to governance policies.

6. Client Rights and Ethical Conduct

6.1 Respect, Safety, and Dignity

Clients must be treated with dignity, respect, and cultural safety at all times. Practices must be inclusive and uphold each client's autonomy, privacy, and humanity—even during disagreements or when services end.

6.2 Informed Consent

Clients must receive clear, accessible information about services, rights, risks, and responsibilities. Consent must be informed, ongoing, and documented before any significant decisions or actions occur.

6.3 Freedom from Violence, Abuse, Neglect, Coercion and Exploitation

Members must implement safeguards to protect clients from violence, abuse, neglect, coercion and exploitation. Allegations must be taken seriously and responded to promptly, following relevant legal frameworks.

6.4 Client Voice and Choice

Clients must be involved in all decisions about their service, including dog selection, training styles, scheduling, and exit planning. Supported decision-making must be offered where capacity is reduced.

6.5 Confidentiality and Data Protection

Personal information must be treated confidentially and stored securely. Information may only be shared with informed consent or under legal obligation.

7. Accessibility, Equity, and Inclusion

7.1 Inclusive Services

Services must be accessible to people with diverse abilities, learning needs, languages, cultures, gender identities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Members must make reasonable adjustments and strive to remove barriers.

7.2 Respect for Diversity

WAFA Members must uphold inclusive practice across multiple dimensions of identity and experience, including:

- **Race and Ethnicity:** Cultural competence must be demonstrated in work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrant and refugee communities, and those with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.
- **Gender:** Members must affirm the identities of all clients, including cisgender, transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse people.
- **Sexuality:** Members must affirm clients of all sexual orientations, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, straight, and asexual individuals.

- **Disability:** Clients with physical, sensory, intellectual, cognitive, psychosocial or other disability—including complex and fluctuating conditions—must be supported without bias or pressure.
- **Cultural Backgrounds:** Members must accommodate culturally specific needs and values, including traditions held by people of Greek, Indonesian, Estonian, or other cultural heritages.
- **Religious/Spiritual Beliefs:** Members must respect religious or spiritual beliefs (e.g. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism) and allow space for clients to practise their faith safely.
- **Age:** Members must ensure that clients of all ages—from children to older people—are be supported with age-appropriate communication and planning.
- **Socioeconomic Status (SES):** Members must ensure services are accessible regardless of financial situation, including clients from low-SES communities or remote areas.

7.3 Funding Transparency and Support for Informed Financial Decision-Making

WAFA Members must uphold the highest standards of financial transparency and ethical conduct in all client interactions. All pricing, invoicing, and service costs must be disclosed clearly, accessibly, and before the delivery of any billable service.

Clients must be supported to make informed, voluntary decisions about how they fund services. Acceptable sources of funding may include (but are not limited to):

- National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)
- Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA)
- Workers Compensation schemes
- Victims of Crime Assistance or Victim Services
- Medicare funding (e.g. via Mental Health Care Plans)
- Centrelink programs or payments
- Other insurance or compensation payouts
- Direct personal payments from the client or family
- Private or corporate sponsorship

It is entirely acceptable for a client to self-fund or contribute from their own private or family finances. Charities, community organisations, or philanthropic bodies may also cover some or all associated costs. These options must be discussed respectfully, without pressure or judgment.

Clients must never be required to:

- Fundraise for their own services

- Appear in marketing, social media, or promotional materials
- Publicly share their story or personal experiences
- Disclose private funding details beyond what is strictly necessary for service delivery
- Access personal superannuation to cover service costs
- Make mandatory donations to the provider, trainer, or any affiliated organisation
- Participate in events or programs not directly related to their training or goals
- Endorse products, businesses, or service providers
- Accept sponsorships or support that they do not consent to

All promotional participation must be fully informed, opt-in, and revocable at any time without penalty or loss of service. WAFA members must ensure no coercion, pressure, or implied obligation is placed on clients to contribute beyond their role as a service recipient.

Any such participation must be completely voluntary, based on informed consent, and free from coercion or expectation.

Members must avoid financial conflicts of interest and must not influence a client's decisions regarding funding, service providers, or supports based on personal or organisational financial gain. Where referrals are made, they must reflect the client's best interests and informed choice.

Clients have the right to:

- Receive itemised quotes or invoices
- Seek independent advice or advocacy
- Decline services or products without penalty

All financial communication must be culturally appropriate, accessible, and respectful of the client's literacy, language, and decision-making preferences.

7.4 Low-Cost and Peer Models

W7AFA welcomes diverse service models. Members using peer-led, volunteer-supported, low-cost or social enterprise models must meet all client safety and ethical standards.

7.5 No Forced Medical Compliance

WAFA members must not require clients to accept or comply with specific medical diagnoses, therapies, treatments, or behavioural labels as a condition of access to services. For example, clients cannot be forced to adopt specific diagnoses (e.g. autism, PTSD, schizophrenia) to justify their use of an assistance animal or related funding. A broad understanding of disability, as defined under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*, is sufficient.

Informed consent, not compliance, is the foundation of ethical service provision.

8. Safeguarding and Welfare

8.1 Risk Assessment and Planning

WAFA members must actively involve clients in collaboratively developing comprehensive risk assessments and individualised support plans that address the unique needs and circumstances of the client-animal partnership. These plans should:

- Identify potential risks to client safety, animal welfare, and the public, including environmental, behavioural, medical, and social factors.
- Include strategies to mitigate identified risks and contingency plans for emergencies or unexpected events.
- Be culturally safe, trauma-informed, and tailored to the client's communication preferences and support requirements.
- Be clearly documented, accessible to the client and relevant support persons, and regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changing circumstances or progress.

8.2 Client Capacity and Supporters

When a client's decision-making capacity is limited or fluctuating, WAFA members must:

- Respect the legal framework regarding decision-making authority, engaging with appointed guardians, attorneys, or other legal decision-makers as required.
- Promote supported decision-making by involving informal supporters, family members, advocates, or cultural representatives, ensuring the client's voice and preferences remain central.
- Avoid substitute decision-making unless mandated by law, always seeking to empower the client to make their own informed choices wherever possible.
- Ensure communication is accessible and adapted to cognitive, linguistic, or sensory needs, including use of interpreters or augmentative communication aids.

8.3 Conflict of Interest and Independence

Members must:

- Transparently declare any actual or perceived conflicts of interest, including but not limited to roles such as support coordinators, carers, landlords, or family members involved in the client's life.
- Establish safeguards to ensure that dual roles do not compromise the client's autonomy, privacy, or best interests.
- Prioritise the client's welfare, independence, and preferences over any personal, financial, or professional interests.
- Where conflicts cannot be adequately managed, refer the client to an independent service provider to uphold ethical standards.

8.4 Independent Advocacy

Clients must be:

- Informed of their right to access independent advocacy services at any stage of their engagement with WAFA members, including during service delivery, complaints, or reviews.
- Supported in connecting with advocates who can assist in navigating complex systems, understanding rights, and voicing concerns.
- Protected from any form of retaliation, discrimination, or service disruption as a result of seeking advocacy or raising complaints.
- Provided with clear information and resources about local advocacy organisations and how to access them.

8.5 Right to Review and Appeal

WAFA members must implement and communicate a transparent and accessible complaints, review, and appeal process that includes:

- Clear steps for clients to raise concerns or dissatisfaction with services or decisions.
- Timely and respectful investigation of complaints with regular updates provided to the client.
- Options for internal resolution, mediation, or escalation to WAFA's independent peer advocacy or dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Assurance that no adverse consequences will follow a client's use of the complaints or appeal process.
- Documentation and feedback loops to use complaints data for continuous improvement.

8.6 Cessation of Services

When services must be discontinued due to risk, welfare concerns, contract breach, illness, or other reasons, members must:

- Provide the client with clear, honest, and respectful communication regarding the reasons for cessation.
- Offer adequate notice in line with service agreements or legal obligations, allowing time for adjustment and planning.
- Collaborate with the client and their support network to develop a transition or exit plan, including referrals to alternative providers or supports where available.
- Document the process and outcomes fully, maintaining transparency and client dignity.

- Avoid abrupt or unsupported termination that could jeopardize client welfare or animal wellbeing.

9. Animal Partnership and Training Process

9.1 Client Matching and Training

- WAFA members must actively involve clients in the animal matching process to ensure the best fit for both the client's needs and the animal's characteristics.
- Clients should receive comprehensive, accessible information about the animal's temperament, abilities, and anticipated training outcomes, as well as potential challenges.
- Members must consider the client's lifestyle, environment, physical and emotional needs, and preferences when recommending animals.
- Matching must respect cultural, sensory, and communication requirements, ensuring the client is empowered to make an informed, voluntary choice.
- Training plans should be co-developed, transparent, and adaptable, incorporating client goals and timelines.

9.2 Shared Learning and Support

- Training delivery must be personalised and adapted to the client's unique communication style, learning preferences, cognitive abilities, and cultural background.
- Members should employ a range of teaching methods such as visual aids, hands-on demonstrations, written materials, and digital resources to enhance understanding.
- Clients must be encouraged to actively participate in all aspects of training, including care routines, handling techniques, and public access skills.
- Support should include practical coaching, reinforcement strategies, and encouragement to build client confidence and competence.
- Where applicable, members should involve family members, carers, or support persons to foster a collaborative learning environment.

9.3 Progress Monitoring

- Members must establish regular, scheduled opportunities for feedback and progress reviews with the client, either in person or via remote communication.
- Progress reports should be clear, objective, and documented, highlighting achievements, challenges, and areas needing adjustment.
- Clients must be encouraged to ask questions, express concerns, and suggest modifications to training goals or methods.
- Assessment should be an ongoing, dynamic process allowing for flexibility and responsiveness to changing client needs or circumstances.

- Members should document any behavioural issues or setbacks and collaboratively develop strategies to address them.

9.4 Post-Placement Support

- Members must provide structured post-placement support to ensure the ongoing success of the animal-client partnership.
- Support may include troubleshooting behavioural issues, retraining, public access planning, health monitoring, and refresher sessions.
- Clients should have clear avenues to access assistance promptly when challenges arise, including emergency contact options.
- Follow-up should be proactive and sustained over time, recognising that needs may evolve and unexpected difficulties can occur.
- Members should facilitate connections to peer networks or mentoring programs for additional client support.

9.5 Reassessment and Withdrawal

- When an animal is deemed unsuitable or unable to continue in its role, members must communicate this clearly and sensitively to the client with comprehensive documentation.
- The reassessment process must involve the client and their support network, exploring options for re-training, replacement, or alternative supports.
- Members must provide emotional support and guidance to clients navigating the transition, acknowledging the potential impact on the client's wellbeing.
- Where withdrawal is necessary, members must coordinate the safe retirement or rehoming of the animal according to welfare standards.
- Documentation of all decisions, communications, and support offered must be maintained for accountability and transparency.

10. Additional Client Engagement Standards

10.1 Trauma-Informed Practice

- Members must have a thorough understanding of trauma and its potential impacts on clients, including how past experiences may affect engagement, trust, and behaviour.
- Service delivery should prioritise safety, transparency, and client empowerment to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation.
- Staff must be trained to recognise signs of trauma and respond with sensitivity, patience, and appropriate referral pathways when needed.
- Communication should emphasise choice, control, and collaboration to foster client autonomy and healing.

10.2 Cultural Safety and Intersectionality

- Members must deliver services that are culturally safe, recognising and respecting the diversity of clients' identities, histories, and worldviews.
- Intersectionality must be central to practice, understanding how overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, disability, sexuality) affect clients' experiences and barriers.
- Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients requires culturally appropriate protocols and may involve Elders or community representatives.
- Services must actively challenge discrimination and bias, creating welcoming environments for CALD, LGBTQIA+, and other marginalised groups.
- Members should seek community input and co-design service elements to ensure cultural relevance and responsiveness.

10.3 Complaints and Conflict Resolution

- Members must provide clear, accessible information on how clients can raise complaints or concerns safely and confidentially.
- Complaint processes must be timely, fair, and transparent, with no fear of retaliation or negative impact on service delivery.
- Staff must be trained to manage conflicts constructively and escalate issues appropriately.
- Members should document complaints and resolutions systematically to support continuous improvement and accountability.
- Clients should be informed about external complaint avenues and advocacy support where internal resolution is not satisfactory.

10.4 Consent to Withdrawal of Services

- Initial service agreements must clearly explain conditions that may lead to suspension or termination of services, including welfare concerns, non-compliance, or mutual agreement.
- Clients must receive advance notice and clear reasons if services are to be paused or ended.
- Members must ensure withdrawal is handled respectfully and collaboratively, minimising distress or disruption to the client.
- Where possible, alternative support or referrals should be offered to maintain client wellbeing and continuity of care.
- Documentation of all withdrawal decisions and communications must be maintained.

10.5 Shared Decision-Making and Goal Setting

- Clients must be recognised as experts in their own lives and central partners in all decisions related to training, animal care, and service goals.
- Members must facilitate shared decision-making by providing clear, accessible information and options.
- Goal setting should be flexible, personalised, and revisited regularly to reflect evolving client needs and aspirations.
- Communication styles and planning tools should be adapted to client preferences, including visual aids, plain language, or assistive technology.
- Collaborative planning supports client empowerment, motivation, and sustained partnership success.

10.6 Peer Support and Mentoring

- Members should proactively connect clients with peer mentors who have lived experience as assistance animal handlers, providing relatable guidance and encouragement.
- Peer support can enhance client confidence, reduce isolation, and promote practical problem-solving based on real-world experience.
- Where formal peer mentoring is not available, members should facilitate informal connections within client communities or support groups.
- Training and resources should be provided to peer mentors to ensure quality and consistency.
- Peer programs must be voluntary and respectful of client choice.

10.7 Evaluation and Feedback

- Members must regularly invite and actively seek client feedback throughout the service journey to identify strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement.
- Feedback mechanisms should be accessible, confidential, and easy to use, including surveys, interviews, or informal check-ins.
- Client insights should directly inform service development, staff training, and policy updates through co-design processes where possible.
- Members must communicate back to clients how their feedback has influenced changes, demonstrating respect and transparency.
- Evaluation should be ongoing to ensure services remain responsive and client-centred.

10.8 Handling Disruption in Partnership

- If a working animal becomes temporarily or permanently unable to continue their role due to health, behaviour, or other issues, members must inform clients promptly and compassionately.
- Members must offer clear explanations, emotional support, and practical assistance in exploring interim solutions or alternative partnerships.
- Transition planning should be client-centred, minimising disruption and promoting continuity of service wherever possible.
- Clients should be supported through grief or adjustment processes related to loss or change of their working animal.
- Documentation of disruption events, client communications, and support plans must be maintained.

10.9 Access to WAFA Advocacy and Dispute Resolution

- Members must inform clients about WAFA's independent advocacy services and dispute resolution pathways as an accessible option for support.
- Clients must be assured that accessing these services will not negatively affect their ongoing support or relationship with members.
- WAFA will maintain impartial and timely investigation and resolution processes, including peer-led reviews where appropriate.
- Members are required to cooperate fully with WAFA's investigations, providing requested information and engaging constructively.
- This transparency supports client rights, trust, and accountability across the WAFA community.

11. Review, Revision and Approvals

This policy will be reviewed annually by the steering committee to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. Any revisions will require approval from the steering committee.

12. Implementation

WAFA members must integrate these standards into governance frameworks, operational policies, financial management, human resources, and client service delivery to maintain high standards of accountability and organisational integrity.

13. Enforcement

WAFA enforces these standards through its accreditation and audit processes. Non-compliance will lead to remedial actions and may impact ongoing WAFA membership and certification status.

14. Contact Information

For further information or assistance related to this standard, please contact the steering committee at the following email address: admin@workinganimals.com.au

Document Control

Version	Date	Author	Change Description	Approved By
V1.0	17/05/2025	V. Solomon	Initial	C.Williams