

Scottish Government submission of 9 February 2023

PE1993/A Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements

Response to Petition PE1993: Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements

Please find herein an official response to petition PE1993; which calls for the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure social work students have access to adequate financial support during their studies by:

- 1) Providing bursaries to all third and fourth year undergraduate social work students on work placements.
- 2) Reforming the assessment criteria and adequately funding the bursaries for postgraduate social work students on work placements.

Background

Scotland's standard support package is the most generous on offer across the UK, however this does not eliminate financial hardship for students and the support on offer is kept under review to ensure it offers the best possible support, even under the limitations created by the current pressures on public finances.

David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, who lodged petition PE1993: Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements are final year social work students from Glasgow Caledonian University who have experienced challenges around financial hardship and are campaigning for change for social work students.

There has been ongoing contact between the Scottish Government and the petitioners since October 2022. Their campaign to reform the support available for social work students included contacting Ministers and partner organisations in a letter signed by 300 students (dated 26 October 2022), supported by the Social Workers Union, the Scottish Association of Social Workers and 20 social work lecturers. They also have raised the issue in the national press; and lodged the petition in

question with the Scottish Parliament (PE1993: Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements).

The petitioners received responses to their initial correspondence from Mr Jamie Hepburn MSP, Minister for Higher and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training and a separate response jointly signed by Iona Colvin, the Chief Social Work Adviser (CSWA), and the CEO of the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Each response laid out details of student financial support and specifically the support available for social work students as well as ongoing work to review the support available.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training recently met with David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, as well as representatives of the Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW); the Social Workers Union (SWU); and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). This meeting, on 18 January 2023, provided an opportunity for the Minister to hear first-hand about the challenges facing students on social work placements and discuss student support for social work students more generally.

The points raised by the petitioners in their meeting with Mr Hepburn were captured and will be taken into consideration when progressing current work to review the support available. The Minister also expressed to the petitioners that he and his fellow Ministers would welcome maintaining an open line of communication on this matter.

Student Support for Social Work Students

Social work students have access to the standard undergraduate support package which includes tuition fees, bursary and a student loan as well as living-cost grants depending on their circumstances (this package is not available to nursing, paramedic and midwifery students). There is a recognition of the challenges faced by students who are required to balance study with other commitments, as well as additional costs incurred during their time spent studying. The student support package is there to support students with these costs and the amount of support now available in Scotland is the highest it has ever been. The Scottish Government will continue to work towards our commitment to provide student support equivalent to the living wage over the next three years.

Students who require additional support on top of the main student support package can apply for Discretionary Funds. These funds are intended to provide assistance e.g. with housing or travel costs, for students who experience financial difficulty accessing or remaining in further or higher education. They are allocated by Scottish Ministers and administered by individual colleges and universities. This academic year the Scottish Government has provided £16.8m in hardship funding to colleges and universities to support students.

Social Work Practice Placements

Social work students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) are required to spend a proportion of their studies on practice placement. This is typically carried out off-site and will create extra travel & subsistence costs for many students. Placements will last for up to 200 days across the length of a student's course.

Where there is need to fund travel costs for students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to attend their practice placements, many different funding routes already exist. As well as the SAAS standard package for undergraduates and SSSC's postgraduate bursary (detailed below), each university will have its own discretionary hardship fund. The Scottish Government also offers a demand led Practice Learning Travel & Subsistence Grant to all nine social work universities to further support with student costs.

In recognition of the request to extend support to undergraduate social work students over the summer period, last year a programme was launched giving students in receipt of the Care Experienced Bursary the option to receive their funding in 12-monthly payments. The findings of this will be used to determine whether it should be extended to the full undergraduate package from 2024/25 academic year. This would include students studying an undergraduate social work degree.

Postgraduate Social Work Bursaries

Currently, SAAS do not fund postgraduate Social Work courses as selected students are eligible to claim financial support from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) in the form of a bursary. The SSSC distribute a total of £2.655m in non-repayable grant form each year. The

package on offer from SSSC is overall more generous than the postgraduate loan package on offer from SAAS. There are no plans to remove the SSSC package.

SSSC are responsible for the administration of postgraduate social work bursaries and other support available to postgraduate social work students, including the Hardship Fund for postgraduate social work students. The Hardship Fund was approved by the Scottish Government and the SSSC in May 2020 as part of the Scottish Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, this has received additional Scottish Government funding to be available for postgraduate social work students through 2021/22 and 2022/23.

SSSC bursary places are limited, meaning that there are a number of postgraduate students without access to financial support. This is currently being considered in the context of the review of postgraduate funding, as committed to in the 2021-22 Programme for Government. For the 2023/24 academic year, Scottish domiciled postgraduate students studying an eligible course are able to apply for a tuition fee loan up to £7,000 and a living cost loan up to £4,500 for the duration of their course. However, this support does not currently extend to those studying MSc Social Work.

While postgraduate bursaries are available through the SSSC, all eligible undergraduate students can apply for the normal support package administered by SAAS. Whilst the preference for bursaries over loans will undoubtedly be shared by most students (and not unique to those studying social work), student loans are an element of the established student support system.

Our system for supporting students in Scotland is predicated upon our commitment to a system of free tuition for Scottish students studying for their first undergraduate degree.

The funding landscape and pressures across the Scottish Government budget are challenging and when determining the level of support available to Scottish domiciled students, the Scottish Government must balance the need to ensure that all students are able to access a student support package that is fair, while also being sustainably balanced in terms of the overall affordability of the student support system.

However, there is ongoing work happening in this area, with the support available for social work students being considered with links to workforce planning in social work. This will require extensive further analysis and the likely financial implications against the current budgetary context, as well as wider challenges in the sector.

SSSC are also working with relevant universities and the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) to explore additional funding models across social work education more widely, working with social work universities to consider collectively how to support social work students through the current pressures being faced.

As said previously the recent discussion between the petitioners, partner organisations and Mr Hepburn has also provided an opportunity to ensure the points expressed in that meeting by the petitioners can be included as part of this wider consideration of the social work workforce and support for students.