

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 18 June 2025
11th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

Introduction

Petitioner David Grimm and Lucy Challoner

Petition summary Calling on 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.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1993>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 30 October 2024](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Higher and Further Education.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 9 February 2023](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,199 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
June 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

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

Petitioner

David Grimm and Lucy Challoner

Date Lodged

6 December 2022

Petition summary

Calling on 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.

Previous action

I am one of more than 300 social work students who signed a letter to:

- Minister for Higher Education
- Interim Chief Executive, Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)
- Chief Executive, Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC)
- Chief Executive, Scottish Funding Council
- Chief Social Work Adviser

The letter was supported by the Social Workers Union and the Scottish Association of Social Workers.

Background information

Unlike nurses and paramedics, when social work undergraduates spend nine months on placements in their third and fourth years, there are no bursaries to help them.

This means social work students have to work full-time on a placement, study and work shifts or rely on foodbanks to make ends meet.

The Scottish Government should provide bursaries to all third and fourth-year undergraduate social work students in Scotland for the full length of their nine-month placements. These bursaries should be worth as much as bursaries for nurses and paramedics.

We calculate that this would have an annual cost of £7.4 million to the Scottish Government.

Bursaries are available for postgraduate students, however, students argue that the criteria for assessing bursary applications are in desperate need of reform.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1993 on 30 October 2024

The Convener: The next continued petition, PE1993, which was lodged by David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ensure that social work students have access to adequate financial support during their studies by providing bursaries to all third and fourth-year undergraduate social work students on work placements, and to reform the assessment criteria and adequately fund the bursaries for postgraduate social work students on work placements.

We last considered the petition on 20 December, when we agreed to write to the Scottish Social Services Council and the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans. The minister's response to the committee highlights that, from this academic year, "postgraduate students who are not eligible to receive bursary support from the Scottish Social Services Council ... will be able to apply for the postgraduate funding package administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).

The response also highlights the Scottish Social Services Council's new model and schedule of rates for the financial support that it provides to postgraduate students. It has also worked to increase clarity for students on the funding that they will receive if they are eligible for a bursary; to reduce the complexity of assessments; and to streamline the administrative processes.

The Social Work Education Partnership commissioned a review of practice learning funding, which reported in September 2023. The minister's written submission states that the "recommendations are being considered" by the Scottish Government. The Scottish Social Services Council's written submission states that an action plan is "being drafted by the SWEP Programme Office".

The petitioners are concerned that the minister is not taking ownership of the issue. Their submission states that "it is unfair to try and palm off decision making onto others", and that "the Government will need to make funding available to enable this policy to happen".

Do colleagues have any suggestions for action?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would consider writing to the Minister for Higher and Further Education to ask what consideration the Scottish Government has given to the recommendations of the practice learning funding report and what actions will be taken to implement its findings, and to ask whether the Scottish Government will meet the petitioners to discuss the findings of the practice learning funding report.

The Convener: Are colleagues content?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans written submission, 4 December 2024

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

Thank you for your letter dated 6 November 2024, regarding consideration given by the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee to petition PE1993 (which calls for an increase to the funding support available to social work students in Scotland), at the Committee's meeting on 30 October 2024. You noted that the Committee is keen to understand what consideration the Scottish Government has given to the recommendations of the Practice Learning Funding report and what actions will be taken to implement its findings; and that Members are also interested to know whether the Scottish Government will meet with the Petitioners to discuss the findings of the Practice Learning Funding report.

It may be helpful for me to provide clarity on the purpose and outcomes of the report 'Social Work Practice Learning Funding: Research and Evaluation', also referred to as the practice learning funding report. I will then set out the improvements we have made to social work student funding since I last wrote to you in January this year, for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, in light of the report's findings.

Report - 'Social Work Practice Learning Funding: Research and Evaluation'

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) commissioned research into social work practice learning funding in Scotland, on behalf of the national Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP). The SWEP programme office own the related stakeholder engagement, handling and publication of the report.

The research illuminated the complexity of the practice learning funding arrangements at the time. It identified a number of recommendations for improvements, both to the system of disbursing financial support for practice learning opportunities, and to the oversight and quality assurance of practice learning. The research scope had also expanded to consider the wider support packages for under and postgraduate social work students.

[SWEP accepted the recommendations of the report and published it on their website, along with their response: Social Work Education Partnership response to recommendations from the 'Social Work Practice Learning Funding: Research and Evaluation' Report | Social Work Education Partnership \(swepscotland.org\).](#)

Several of the recommendations linked to work already underway at a national level, both as part of developing the proposed National Social Work Agency and the SSSC's workplan.

More specifically, Scottish Government made improvements to the form and funding of financial support for social work students as I will outline below. SSSC disburse financial support to providers of practice learning opportunities and undertake quality assurance of practice learning in qualifying programmes. They are taking forward the

report's recommendation to centralise the financial administration of practice learning funding.

SWEP partners continue to explore wider improvements to social work education arrangements in light of the report's findings.

Funding for all students with assessed practice learning placements in-year

From Academic Year 2024-2025, the Scottish Government is providing all eligible under- and post-graduate social work students with an assessed practice learning placement in-year with a grant of £750. Eligible students will receive their grant award directly from the SSSC within 15 working days of receipt of verification of the student's attendance on placement.

The grant is intended to be used flexibly by eligible students to support them with costs incurred while undertaking the practice learning placements that are a mandatory component of their qualifying course. The grant's in-built flexibility of use has been introduced to promote equity of participation, following recognition of existing barriers to participation other than travel expenses. Additional funding of up to £2000 can be claimed from the SSSC by students for exceptional travel costs related to placements in, or students being resident in, remote and rural locations.

Funding for postgraduate social work students

The structure of the SSSC bursary available to students studying full-time on an approved postgraduate social work programme has been changed with effect from Academic Year 2024-2025.

The two main changes introduced were:

- an increased earnings threshold for eligibility
- a streamlining of the various discretionary allowances

The changes have been made to widen access to support for social work study, and to simplify the structure of the bursary, making it easier for potential bursary recipients to consider their options for financial support.

All students eligible for the bursary will now benefit from a package of support comprised of both contributions towards tuition fees and living costs. There is also a range of discretionary allowances available for additional support where required.

Each bursary includes contributions for each year of the student's course of £3415 towards their course fees, and £120 per week of their course towards living costs. Any postgraduate social work student with a household income under £34,000 is eligible.

Full details of the revised Schedule of Rates, including eligibility criteria, were published on the [SSSC website](#).

Any full-time postgraduate social work student not eligible for a SSSC bursary, with a household income above £34,000, can apply to the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) for its [postgraduate support package](#). This includes a tuition fee

loan of up to £7,000 and a living costs loan of up to £6,900, both split equally across each year of the student's course.

The SSSC bursary and SAAS loans are subject to meeting the residency criteria stated on each organisation's website.

In conclusion, the actions we have taken tangibly respond to many of the report's recommendations, within a challenging financial context. Our approach to wider social work education policy development aligns with the report's suggested direction in how to improve the educational journey and support available for social work students.

I understand that SWEP are developing an engagement plan which will ensure that students are involved meaningfully at appropriate points of the Partnership's work. The Scottish Government's Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser, and the Scottish Association of Social Work are both members of SWEP, along with university representatives and the regulator, SSSC.

I hope this response is helpful.

Graeme Dey MSP

Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans

Petitioner written submission, 15 May 2025

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

We are grateful to the Public Petitions Committee for its continued consideration of PE1993 and for the opportunity to respond to the Ministerial submission of 4 December 2024. We also appreciate recent steps taken by the Scottish Government to provide more financial support to social work students. However, we remain concerned that the changes do not yet resolve the fundamental inequality at the heart of our petition.

We welcome:

- The Practice Learning Support Grant (PLSG) of £750 per assessed placement.
- The provision of travel support for remote placements.
- The continued development of degree-level apprenticeships in social work.

These are positive steps and reflect a greater recognition of the vital role social work students play in delivering frontline public services.

Core Inequalities Remain

Despite these improvements, social work students are still treated unequally when compared with students in other frontline professions.

For example:

- Nursing, midwifery and paramedic students can receive up to £47,500 in non-repayable bursaries over four years, with additional allowances for dependents and childcare.
- Social work students, in contrast, must primarily rely on loans and only limited bursary support.

This gap persists even when social work students undertake substantial placement hours in challenging environments.

Illustrative Scenarios

To highlight the real-life impact of the current policy, we provide three student “case studies” below, based on available data from the Scottish Social Services Council and Transport Scotland.

Scenario 1: Student under 22 from a low-income background

These students benefit from the Young Persons’ Free Bus Travel Scheme.

- Placement in a remote area:
 - £1,500 (PLSG for two placements)
 - £4,000 (additional remote area travel support)
 - £8,000 (bursary across four years)
 - *Total non-repayable support: £13,500*
 - *Loans available: up to £37,600*
- Placement in an urban area:
 - £1,500 (PLSG)
 - £8,000 (bursary)
 - *Total support: £9,500*
 - *Loans available: up to £37,600*

Scenario 2: Student over 22 from a low-income background

These students are not eligible for free bus travel.

- Urban placement:
 - £1,500 (PLSG)
 - £8,000 (bursary)
 - *Total support: £9,500*
 - Must cover commuting costs:
 - Strathclyde Partnership for Transport Zone Card: ~£1,911/year
 - Edinburgh: ~£570/year
 - Aberdeen: ~£70/month

These transport costs substantially erode the limited support available.

Scenario 3: Student from higher-income background

These students do not receive means-tested bursaries but may:

- Be eligible for a £2,750 remote location bursary
- Access up to £33,600 in loans

Our Position

While we recognise progress, we believe the current package still falls short of what is needed to ensure equity. It is overly complex, inconsistently applied, and fails to provide sufficient security for students undertaking vital practice placements.

We therefore continue to call on the Scottish Government to:

- Commit to full bursary support for social work students during placement years, aligned with the support given to nursing and allied health students.
- Ensure equitable access to travel support regardless of age or location.
- Simplify and clarify the support system to reduce confusion and inequity.

We would be pleased to provide further evidence or meet with MSPs, Ministers, or officials to support the Committee's ongoing work.