

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

19th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
20 December 2023

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

Lodged on 6 December 2022

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>

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [22 March 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, and to the Scottish Social Services Council.
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 responses from the Scottish Social Services Council and the Minister for Higher and Further Education 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's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,180 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

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

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

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

Petitioner

David Grimm and Lucy Challoner

Date Lodged:

06/12/22

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 22 March 2023

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is the consideration of new petitions. As always, before I introduce the first of the new petitions, I say to petitioners who may be with us or watching our proceedings that we do a considerable amount of work in advance of our first consideration of petitions. Part of that work is getting an initial view from the Scottish Government. That does not necessarily determine the outcome or the actions that we might subsequently take—it is simply an initial view of the Scottish Government’s perspective on the petition. We also receive a briefing from the Parliament’s impartial research service, SPICe. Petitioners should know that that work is done in advance.

The first of the new petitions is PE1993, which has been lodged by David Grimm and Lucy Challoner. It 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, reforming the assessment criteria and adequately funding the bursaries for postgraduate social work students on work placements.

By way of background information, the petitioners highlight that social work students spend nine months on placements during their third and fourth years but that, unlike, for example, student nurses and paramedics, there are no bursaries to support them.

In its initial response to the petition, the Scottish Government notes that the relevant minister met the petitioners and representatives of the Scottish Association of Social Work, the Social Workers Union and the British Association of Social Workers to discuss support for social work students—I might refer to the summary of that meeting later. The Scottish Government’s response also states that, while a preference for bursaries over loan payments is likely to be shared by most students, there should be recognition of the wider funding landscape and the pressures across the Scottish Government’s budget, and of the challenges that that brings to ensuring that the student support package is fair while maintaining the overall affordability of the student support system. The response also highlights that social work students have access to living-cost grants that are not available to nursing, paramedic and midwifery students.

We have also received a submission from the petitioners in response to the Scottish Government. In that submission, the petitioners highlight that the support that is available for social work students currently comes in the form of a repayable loan and depends on household income. That differs from the support available to

nursing, midwifery and paramedic students, who are eligible for a bursary totalling £37,500 over four years. The petitioners tell us that, while undertaking work placements, social work students work just as hard as their colleagues who are on nursing, midwifery and paramedic courses. They recognise that social work students undertake placements only during their third and fourth years, while nursing and midwifery students do so throughout the entirety of their courses, which is why the petition calls for bursaries to be made available for those in the later stages of their study.

The petitioners call for a review of the funding and assessment criteria for postgraduate bursaries administered by the Scottish Social Services Council. As noted in the SPICe briefing, it has not been possible to locate details of that scheme on the SSSC's website, but individual universities provide more details of the scheme.

I want to refer to one comment by the minister in the Scottish Government's response that caught my eye:

"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."

I was slightly entertained by the idea of things being "captured". That expression does not necessarily indicate that there will be a subsequent course of action.

Do members have any comments?

Carol Mochan: This area—the support that is available to students—is really important right across the board. We are trying to attract people into these important jobs, particularly in the public sector. Having met social work students and the social work organisations, I can say that they are at crisis point. People believe them to be good career options, but it is incredibly difficult to finance yourself through that process.

When speaking to social work students, I noted, in particular, that, at that late stage when they are heavily invested in their placement, other people in academic life may be able to get a balance by doing some work to support themselves financially. Are we really asking social work students doing a nine-month placement in the workplace, as they must do, to also take on additional work? That should not be the case if we want them to have the ability to do that well and to get the qualification and experience. It is such an important area: people need to have good experiences as they learn the ropes and go through their career. We need them to be available to our public sector.

I absolutely support keeping the petition open as we seek guidance from social work organisations such as the social work unions and the SSSC on what we could do to help the petitioners with this.

The Convener: I am struck by the work placement point, because we really want individuals at that stage to be focused on delivering their best and getting their best from the work placement. Encouraging them to try to find alternative income streams through work while on a nine-month secondment is not really a healthy prospect or route in those circumstances, so I am inclined to agree.

Alexander Stewart: I agree, convener. There is definitely a gap in the bursary provision. Trying to encourage someone to go into that sector is, in reality, tough enough, but putting extra obstacles in front of individuals will make it much more challenging for them to fulfil the course. As Carol Mochan suggested, it would be useful to get some of that information so that we can identify much more clearly what happens with bursaries for placements in the third and fourth year of social work practice. The petition requires more information to be captured. The minister may have captured that, but we need to capture some information as well to make sure that we are fulfilling our role and getting the full information that is required.

The Convener: I would certainly be interested in writing to the minister to ask him what form he expects his open line of communication to take and whether he is able to confirm a structured and ongoing basis for that. As Carol Mochan suggested, we also want to write more formally to the Scottish Social Services Council to seek its views on the issues raised in the petition. We want a view on providing bursaries to all third- and fourth-year undergraduate social work students on work placements; an explanation of the criteria for assessing bursary applications for postgraduate students; and clarification on where members of the public can access information on the assessment criteria, because SPICe seemed to find that more problematic than it ought to be. If SPICe found it problematic, I do not quite know how other people are meant to find it more readily.

Are we content to keep the petition open and proceed on that basis?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The petition raises important issues. We will write to the minister and to the Scottish Social Services Council, as suggested, and consider the petition again when we consider the responses that we have received from them.

Annexe C

Scottish Social Services Council submission of 9 May 2023

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

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this petition. The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) is the regulator for the social work, social care and children and young people workforce in Scotland. Our work means the people of Scotland can count on social work, social care and children and young people services being provided by a trusted, skilled, confident and valued workforce.

We protect the public by registering the social work, social care and children and young people workforce, setting standards for their practice, conduct, training and education and by supporting their professional development. Where people fall below the standards of practice and conduct we can investigate and act.

We:

- publish the national Codes of Practice for people working in social work, social care and children and young people services and their employers
- register this workforce and make sure they adhere to our Codes of Practice
- promote and regulate their learning and development
- lead workforce development and planning for the social work, social care and children and young people workforce in Scotland and provide national statistics.

The petition is 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.

The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee considered the above petition at its meeting 22 March 2023 and agreed to write to the Scottish Social Services Council to seek its views on the action called for in the petition. The Committee specifically requests:

- a view on providing bursaries to all third and fourth year undergraduate social work students on work placements;
- an explanation of the criteria for assessing bursary applications for postgraduate students; and
- clarification on where members of the public can access information on these assessment criteria.

We will address each of these points in turn.

Providing bursaries to third and fourth year undergraduate social work students

We recognise that there are challenges around the recruitment and retention of staff across the social work, social care and children and young people workforces in Scotland and we welcome any policy that made it easier for people looking to begin a career within this workforce.

It is the role of Scottish Ministers to determine whether bursaries should be provided to third and fourth year social work students. These bursaries would likely be administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) as the SSSC only has a remit to administer postgraduate bursaries. Should Scottish Ministers make the decision to provide bursaries to third and fourth year undergraduate social work students, we would be happy to work with SAAS and Scottish Ministers to develop an effective model for distributing this funding.

The SSSC's role in assessing bursary applications for postgraduate students

Postgraduate bursaries are available for nominated and eligible students studying the MSc Social Work at the following universities:

- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- University of Strathclyde
- Robert Gordon University

- University of Stirling
- University of the West of Scotland
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Open University.

Each university receives a quota of bursary places and must nominate students for each year of the course. Bursary places are allocated at the discretion of universities. The universities send us lists of nominated students twice a year. We then invite those nominated to apply. Nomination does not guarantee eligibility for funding. Students will be assessed for residence eligibility, previous funding received and if eligible, entitlement.

Our role is to administer postgraduate social work bursaries on behalf of the Scottish Government. Postgraduate social work students are the only group the SSSC are authorised to make payments to on behalf of Scottish Ministers.

The postgraduate social work bursaries budget has remained at £2.655m since the 2012/13 financial year. The Schedule of Rates for bursaries and associated allowances is revised annually by the SSSC in accordance with the delegated budgetary provision and any policy or guidance changes made by the Scottish Government.

We make 321 postgraduate bursaries available across all nine of the postgraduate social work university programmes with each university receiving an annual quota of bursaries regardless the number of postgraduate students. These quotas are set annually by the SSSC following budgetary allocation from Scottish Government.

Applicants can be awarded bursaries for tuition fees, maintenance grant, allowances and expenses. The eligibility of each applicant for any allowances and expenses claimed is assessed individually. If eligible, the amount due for payment is calculated and awarded to individual applicants in accordance with the Schedule of Rates.

Over the financial year 2021-2022, we undertook a review of the postgraduate bursary policies, procedures and processes to ensure funding was being disbursed as equitably and efficiently as possible.

We have worked with the Scottish Government to create a Hardship Fund to support postgraduate social work students. Scottish Government has provided additional funding to continue offering Hardship Funding through 2021/22 and 2022/23. This year we expect to

pay out in the region of £85,000 in Hardship funds to social work students.

We are working closely with relevant universities and the wider Social Work Education Partnership forum (SWEP) to explore additional funding models across social work education. This will include looking at how we can maximise the use of funding to support practice placements and are currently reviewing the models that support practice placements. This review is scheduled to conclude this summer.

We have also asked Higher Education Institutions (HEI) leads for a paper on the poverty issues facing students so we can consider how we can better support our social work students.

Where members of the public can access information on assessment criteria

We acknowledge the comments made by SPICe about the availability of information about the postgraduate bursary scheme on our website.

Information on the postgraduate bursary scheme is currently made available to candidates once they have been nominated by their university or if they contact us through our dedicated bursaries email address which is available on our website.

Members of the public can access information on funding for training on our [website](#). This page gives information on part time fee grants, SDS individual training accounts, funding for social work study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and modern apprenticeship funding. We recognise the need to provide more information about the bursary scheme.

To address this we are updating the information on this web page. The updated page will make it clear that our bursaries are available to students of MSc Social Work programmes at the HEIs listed in the previous section.

The page will also give details of the role HEIs play in this process and the fact that nominated candidates will be assessed on the basis of residence eligibility, any previous funding received and entitlement. The residency eligibility criteria are derived from the Student Support (Scotland) Regulations 2022.

This page will also outline that the overall bursary consists of a maximum contribution toward tuition fees of £3,415, a means-tested

grant and dependents allowance and a one-off payment toward placement travel and other expenses.

Minister for Higher and Further Education submission of 24 May 2023

PE1993/E Reform the Financial Support for Social Work Students

Firstly, thank you for the kind congratulations on my appointment expressed in your letter dated 14 April 2023 regarding the Committee's consideration of Petition PE1993: Reform the Financial Support for Social Work Students. I am committed to ensuring my response be as complete as was possible given the background and issues involved.

The petition requests that the Scottish Parliament 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.

You will be aware that, Scotland's standard support package is the most generous on offer across the UK with our system for supporting students predicated upon our commitment to a system of free tuition for Scottish students studying for their first undergraduate degree.

I understand the original response from the Scottish Government to the Committee regarding the petition provided detail covering support currently available for social work students in Scotland via the student support package. I am also aware the Committee has written separately to the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) who have provided information on the bursaries they administer on the Scottish Government's behalf. Accordingly, I will not repeat that information here, however if there are any points that the Committee would like to be clarified, I'd be happy to do so.

My predecessor with Ministerial responsibility for further and higher education, Jamie Hepburn MSP, both in his correspondence and his subsequent meeting with the petitioners and representatives of Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW), and the Social Workers Union (SWU), expressed there is work ongoing to explore the potential for changes to the support available for social work students in the context of links to workforce planning across the sector. I can confirm that this work is being progressed.

It is also my understanding that prior discussion between the petitioners, partner organisations and Mr Hepburn provided an opportunity to ensure the points that have been expressed are being included as part of this wider consideration of the social work workforce and support for students.

SSSC have commissioned a review of practice learning finance, which will report in August and Scottish Government officials are working with sector partners (including the SSSC and SWEP) to explore options for improvements to postgraduate bursaries. There is now a planned piece of work on practice learning and an options appraisal for improving routes into social work.

It is my understanding the 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 social work students can be supported through the current pressures faced.

You may also wish to know that Scottish Government Higher Education officials are currently undertaking a Review of Postgraduate study. This review is ongoing, with initial outputs announced for the 2023/24 Academic Year (AY) in March 2023. This included a £1,500 increase to the postgraduate tuition fee loan to combat the rise in tuition fees. For 2024/25 AY and beyond, officials will continue to evaluate the postgraduate support package and course eligibility criteria. This includes consideration of the current funding arrangements that prevent postgraduate Social Work students from accessing a loan through the normal student support package, should they be unsuccessful in gaining a bursary from the SSSC.

Accordingly, while I am optimistic there is scope to mitigate the issues raised by the campaign, this will require careful analysis in partnership

with stakeholders to ensure due consideration to all factors, not least the financial implications and wider pressures in the education and social work sectors and beyond. It is fundamental this consideration is appropriately underpinned and credible, as 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 system.

Regarding your request on my predecessor's offer to keep lines of communication open with the petitioners, due to the fact that consideration will take time, my view is progress would best be communicated to the sector via official channels by those partner stakeholders with involvement (such as SASW and SWEP) as developments happen.

I am however content that David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, who lodged petition PE1993 should receive an update on progress from Scottish Government officials in the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser in August, and that when the various strands of analysis and exploratory work needed are concluded, a meeting with the petitioners and I can be arranged.

I hope this response satisfies the questions you and the Committee have raised and I would be happy to provide any further information as required.