

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 30 October 2024
16th Meeting, 2024 (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 20 December 2023.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Social Services Council and 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, the Scottish Social Services Council, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. The Social Work Education Partnership commissioned a review of practice learning funding. The report concluded that 'the introduction of a bursary scheme for undergraduate students is necessary to address severe financial hardship amongst students which is particularly experienced during periods of practice learning.' [The full Learning Practice Funding report is available online.](#)
5. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
6. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
7. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 9 February 2023.](#)

CPPP/S6/24/16/8

8. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,194 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

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

Clerks to the Committee
October 2024

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 20 December 2024

The Convener: Our next continued petition, PE1993, 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-year 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.

The committee last considered the petition on 22 March, when we agreed to write to the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education and Minister for Veterans, and to the Scottish Social Services Council.

The response from the Scottish Social Services Council notes that the budget for postgraduate social work bursaries has remained at £2.655 million since 2012-13 and that 321 bursaries are made available. It undertook a review of the bursary policies, procedures and processes in 2021-22 to ensure that funding was disbursed as equitably and efficiently as possible. A review of the models that support practice placements was due to conclude in the summer of this year.

The minister's response states that work is on-going to explore the potential for changes to the support that is available for social work students in the context of workforce planning. It also mentions that the Scottish Social Services Council is working with universities and the social work education partnership to explore additional funding models across social work education.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action in light of the fact that the fund for bursaries has been frozen for more than a decade?

Foyso Choudhury: I had a round-table meeting with students earlier this year. They had loads of concerns about the pressure that they are under.

The minister mentioned that the Scottish Government is considering the funding arrangements. Can we ask the Government what consideration it is giving to issues such as the housing crisis, which place even more pressure on social work students? Will that factor into any decisions about the need for bursaries?

The Convener: Yes, I am sure that we can do that. We might also write to the minister to request details of the on-going exploratory work on potential changes to the support that is available for social work students. I would like some reflection on the thought process that has underpinned the freezing of the bursary fund since 2012-13, because that must affect the number of students that it is capable of supporting. That is more than a decade. I recognise that there are always pressures on funding—no doubt that will be part of any response—but the fund has been frozen over a long period, so other issues might underpin the situation. I would also be interested to know whether, in response to the issues that the petition raises, the

Government's work will consider the introduction of a bursary for third-year and fourth-year undergrad students on work placements.

We might also write to the Scottish Social Services Council to ask what improvements it made following the 2021-22 review of its postgraduate bursary policies and request an update on its review of practice learning finance. In addition, we might ask when it expects to receive the paper from the higher education institution leads on poverty issues facing students, which ties in with Mr Choudhury's request in relation to housing issues, as well.

As there are no other suggestions from members, are we content to proceed on that basis?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans written submission, 30 January 2024

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

Thank you for the letter dated 5 January 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 meeting of the Committee on 20 December 2023.

Postgraduate eligibility for SAAS funding

Since my last communication, the Committee may be interested to know that at the Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW) conference on Wednesday 29 November 2023, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Ms Angela Constance, MSP announced that from the 2024/25 academic year, postgraduate students not eligible to receive bursary support from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) will be able to apply for the postgraduate funding package administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). This change is welcome progress towards ensuring students who wish to become social workers are financially supported to do so.

This positive news was also communicated to David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, who have led the campaign and petition, in a letter dated 8 December 2023.

Postgraduate bursary allocation

I understand that following the SSSC's written submission stating that the postgraduate social work bursaries have not increased budget since 2012/13, the Committee has requested details of the rationale for the lack of increase. While the budget allocated to these postgraduate bursaries has remained at £2.655m, postgraduate bursaries are considered regularly against the wider financial context to ensure as many students as possible can benefit from the support available.

While it is the case that bursaries have not increased in recent years, there have been wider changes to support that have benefited students.

It may be worth noting the SSSC undertook a review of postgraduate bursaries policies and procedures in 2020 on which postgraduate students, employers and universities were consulted. The review led SSSC to introduce a new model and schedule of rates to maximise their support to students to achieve their qualification and enter the workforce to support better outcomes for people who use services, their families and carers. Importantly this also allowed the SSSC to continue to provide financial support to the greatest number of students possible using existing funds.

There were also outcomes in terms of widening access to eligible postgraduate social work students; increasing clarity for students on the funding they would receive if they are eligible for a bursary; reducing the complexity of assessments; and further streamlining of administrative processes with a paperless process, including electronic applications being introduced and on-line calculation of assessments.

Scottish Government approved the continuation for future years of a Hardship Fund for postgraduate social work students provided originally as part of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

OCSWA continue to review support for social work students including consideration of bursaries for third and fourth year undergraduate students on work placements. OCSWA continue to work with the sector to secure evidence required to inform policy development, including findings from the SASW student placement experience survey, to assist with this, and will continue to monitor progress and further our understanding to build in improvements to support available for social work students.

The Committee have raised concerns on whether the financial impact of the housing crisis on students will be considered as part of any future decisions about support for social work students. I'd like to make you aware that the Scottish Government recently undertook a Review of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation, which has now concluded. The Review looked at a number of issues that affect all students (including social work students) such as supply, affordability and regulation. The Review Steering Group formulated a number of recommendations which have been considered by Ministers. A statement which will include an outline of next steps will follow shortly.

Links with social work workforce planning

I note the Committee's interest in the ongoing work to explore possible changes to support for social work students in the context of links to workforce planning across the sector. Scottish Government's Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser (OCSWA) is working with analytical colleagues and the SSSC to review available social work education data and streamline its collection to support more effectively targeted investment for capacity-building and support. This work will be aligned with social work workforce data improvement, which is also underway, with social work employers critical partners in its success.

An options appraisal is in development which will outline areas for further investment to contribute to boosting numbers of social work graduates entering the Scottish workforce.

Wider improvements to social work education

OCSWA is working closely with sector partners, including the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP), to deliver improved consistency and effective delivery of practice placements and financial support for students. This will be facilitated by the development of a regional infrastructure to support the provision of practice learning across Scotland. SWEP commissioned a review of Practice Learning Funding, which

reported in September 2023. The detailed recommendations are being considered in the context of the work detailed above to ensure an appropriately strategic response.

Meanwhile, work with university partners continues to review the support provided to students for travel to and from their placement locations. The new Travel Grant includes an increase in provision per student and is applicable to all students undertaking placement learning opportunities during fulltime study. This has successfully been rolled out.

In the longer term work with Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), employers and the SSSC to ensure courses and Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) will continue to contribute effectively to future workforce requirements.

Diversifying routes into qualifying programmes

OCSWA is working with partners to diversify routes into Scottish social work qualifying programmes in order to facilitate entry for those at different stages of their working life and from different socio-economic and professional backgrounds.

Accordingly, in 2022-23 OCSWA contributed £264,000 of funding to boost capacity of in-work social work qualifying programmes, to contribute to increasing the numbers of social workers entering the profession in Scotland and further initiatives to support uptake of existing in-work qualifying routes are currently under consideration.

The Scottish Government are also leading development of a proposal for a Graduate Apprenticeship in Social Work. This work is supported by an Agile Working Group, with membership comprised of representatives from local authorities, SSSC, COSLA, SWEP and HEIs.

I hope this response is informative and satisfies the Committee.

GRAEME DEY MSP

Scottish Social Services Council written submission, 1 February 2024

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

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute additional information 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.

We initially contributed to this petition in May 2023. The Committee has now requested the following additional information:

- information about what improvements the Scottish Social Services Council made following the 2021-22 review of its postgraduate bursary policies, procedures and processes
- an update on the review of practice learning finance
- information about when the paper from Higher Education Institution leads on poverty issues is expected and confirmation on whether this paper will be shared with the Scottish Government.

We will address each of these points in turn.

Improvements made by us following the 2021-22 review of our postgraduate bursary policies, procedures and processes

The SSSC began administering Postgraduate Bursaries on behalf of the Scottish Government in 2004. The process for administration and assessing applications has been streamlined during this time with a paperless process, including electronic applications being introduced and on-line calculation of assessments. The Postgraduate Bursary Schedule of Rates is updated annually.

The review of postgraduate bursaries policies and procedures we carried out in 2021-22 had the following aims:

- Widening access to eligible postgraduate social work students.
- Increasing clarity for students on the funding they would receive if they are eligible for a bursary.
- Reducing the complexity of assessments.
- Further streamlining administrative processes.

The Review modelled several options with the preferred affordable option allowing a maximum of 321 eligible students to receive an element of funding. Tuition fees would remain at the current rate of £3,415.00 pa alongside a one-off payment of £510.00 pa for travel, books and sundries. Weekly allowances for the duration of the course are £120.00 for students living independently and £50.00 for those living in their parental home. Students would also receive a weekly dependants allowance for each adult or child dependant of £63.00 and a contribution of £70.00 for each child in childcare.

Since the 2021-22 review we have continued to look at how we can streamline and improve our bursary policies, procedures and processes. We have recently made changes to the quotas to allow us to spread funding out more and to utilise quotas not fulfilled by the allocated University. We have also changed the sundry allowance to £600 pa and have changed the means-tested grant allowance to remove the distinction between students living on their own and those living in the parental home.

Update on the review of practice learning finance

In response to a request from Scottish Government, the SSSC commissioned a review of social work practice learning funding on behalf of the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) in May 2023. The remit of the research was to review the funding streams, structures and mechanisms that support social work practice placements. The broad objectives of the financial review were:

- To ensure improved consistency in how funding support is applied across student placements in all higher education institutions
- To maximise the resource available to support student placements and offer flexibility to employers in how they use funding to support student placements
- To encourage more employers to offer placements by ensuring financial support is available to support the employment of Practice Educators or other support required to supervise placements.
- To ensure funding is available for both undergraduate and post graduate placements.

Researchers from Learning Network West were appointed to undertake the review, which concluded in September 2023.

The research findings set out a number of recommendations which were shared with SWEP in September 2023. An action plan in response to the recommendations is currently being drafted by the SWEP Programme Office, which will identify short, medium and longer term actions. Communication about this will come out from the SWEP programme office in due course.

One immediate action that is currently being prioritised by Scottish Government is a change to the travel/subsistence payments to increase financial support and ensure consistency of support provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate (home)

students on placements. This short-term measure is being progressed by Scottish Government in partnership with the Higher Education Institutions.

This change will offer greater financial equality for all students. Communication about this will come out from Scottish Government and/or the SWEP programme office soon.

While not directly impacting undergraduate students, another action that has recently been taken forward by Scottish Government is that, from 2024-25 academic year, postgraduate students not eligible to receive SSSC bursary support will be able to apply for the postgraduate funding package administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS).

The SSSC and/or SWEP partners will keep stakeholders updated on the work of the financial review as it develops, as we all continue to work together to ensure that students who wish to become social workers are financially supported to do so.

The paper from Higher Education Institution leads

The Higher Education Institution social work programme leads are supporting the SWEP programme office with development of a paper on poverty issues for consideration by SWEP. The SSSC is not involved in the development of the paper and therefore is unable to comment on when the paper can be expected or whether it will be shared directly with Scottish Government once it is completed.

Petitioner written submission, 22 February 2024

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

We thank the Committee for continuing to look into the issue of bursaries for social work students on placements in third and fourth years. We appreciate being given sight of the Minister's response to the Committee.

Of most concern is the review into the options available for undergraduate students on placement which has been referenced in the Minister's response and in letters to us from civil servants on 30th August and 15th September 2023.

In a letter on 30th August, the OCSWA set out that: "The review of practice learning finance commissioned by the SSSC was due to report in August but has been delayed; however the review has so far met with various stakeholders, including SASW, SWU and representatives of your campaign. Emerging insights have been shared with Scottish Government and are informing wider work on social work education improvements – we will share any conclusions with you in due course."

We understand that the wheels of Government can sometimes move slowly, but this review was commissioned in June 2023 and evidence was submitted over the summer, so we are unable to understand why it was not able to be published in time for the 2024/25 Budget cycle.

We would now urge MSPs on the Committee to put down written questions in Parliament to formally request the review findings be made public.

If the review is still somehow delayed, we would urge MSPs to formally request that the “emerging insights” which the Minister has been privy to be published instead and a deadline for publication of the review is confirmed.

What is most concerning to us is that the overall tone of the Minister’s response is to pass the buck.

He states that OCSWA “continue to review support for social work students including consideration of bursaries for third and fourth year undergraduate students on work placements.”

At the end of the day, the Minister and the Government will need to make funding available to enable this policy to happen and it is unfair to try and palm off decision making onto others.

We would urge MSPs on the Committee to call the Minister to give evidence in person on this issue and to ask him to explain why the Government is allowing a straightforward policy decision to drift.

Every day that the Government fails to make a decision, the situation for social work students gets worse.

Universities are continuing to refer social work students to discretionary funds to live on day to day - which in themselves are running out due to the pressures being put on them.

A [damning report by the Scottish Association of Social Work](#) highlighted further challenges for students on placements.

New data from the Social Workers Union due to be published shortly reveals that over half (52%) of Scottish social workers are thinking of leaving the profession, which will place even more burden on the next generation of social workers.

As we have stated from the outset we are not asking for special treatment, merely for equality with other students who work on placements in the public sector and are paid for their work.

It seems unbelievable that in 2024 local authorities are still exploiting social work students as a pool of unpaid labour to help deliver vital public services as the students themselves are struggling to survive in an ongoing cost of living crisis.

We once again thank the Committee for taking this issue seriously and we would be happy to meet with the Committee if this would be useful.

Petitioner written submission, 15 October 2024

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

Further to the Minister's written submission on 1 August 2023 and the Committee's proposed date to consider the petition, we wanted to express our strong opinion that the petition should remain open as our concerns have yet to be fully addressed.

In the Minister's correspondence, the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) report is referenced, which was commissioned as a result of our campaign. It was published at the end of July 2024. However, the Minister's response indicates that it was ready for discussion with stakeholders in December 2023.

We are concerned by the delay in publishing the report and the lack of engagement with student representatives in any discussions during the period between December 2023 and July 2024 when we had only been told the report was "delayed". We are also concerned that the Government published the report without informing people who had contributed to it that it would be published.

While the report does acknowledge our concerns, it fails to adequately address them. We would request that meetings be held to discuss the report and the concrete steps that are being taken to implement its findings with current and recent students to seek their views.

The report states "undergraduate students in Scotland are disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in Wales, England and NI who all receive some form of financial grant incentive towards their studies." Ministers and regulators know that the system is unfair, yet they still won't bring in the full set of reforms needed. We believe that this in itself should be the basis for the petitions Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee to continue its work on this issue.

We welcome the Minister's commitment in his letter that "from the 2024/25 academic year, postgraduate students not eligible to receive bursary support from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) will be able to apply for the postgraduate funding package administered by the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)."

However, this does not equate to the parity with nursing students or with our counterparts in other parts of the UK, which we have sought. We would request that Ministers set out a clear pathway to achieving this equality as soon as possible.

Finally, we also welcome the Government's plan to develop a higher level apprenticeship in social work which will enable students to "earn as they learn" to a degree-level qualification in social work. We urge Ministers to prioritise this work but also to ensure that bursaries are offered to those who wish to complete a route to a social work degree through a university-based approach.