

Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans 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 SWEF) 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.