

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

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

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 \(swepscotland.org\)](https://www.swepscotland.org/research-and-evaluation-report).

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