

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

Petitioner written submission, 15 May 2025

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.