

Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans

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 ~~to various outcomes including~~ 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