

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

5th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday  
22 March 2023

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

<b>Lodged on</b>	3 January 2023
<b>Petitioner</b>	David Grimm and Lucy Challoner
<b>Petition summary</b>	<p>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:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Providing bursaries to all third and fourth year undergraduate social work students on work placements.</li><li>2) Reforming the assessment criteria and adequately funding the bursaries for postgraduate social work students on work placements.</li></ol>
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1993">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1993</a>

### Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 3 January 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected to collect this information. 2,089 signatures have been received.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.

6. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe D**.

## Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

**Clerk to the Committee**

## Annexe A

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

## Petitioner

David Grimm and Lucy Challoner

## Date lodged

3 January 2023

## 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

The logo for SPICe, featuring the letters 'SPICe' in a white, sans-serif font on a dark purple background.

The Information Centre  
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

# **Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1993](#): ‘Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements’, lodged by David Grimm and Lucy Challoner**

## Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition is seeking to ensure that students undertaking studies preparatory to becoming a social worker receive bursaries during work placements.

### Becoming a registered social worker

In order to qualify to be a registered social worker, an individual needs to have completed either an honours degree or postgraduate qualification in social work approved by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC).

All courses include practice learning placements where the individual is assessed in work placements in a variety of social work settings. Work placements are an integral part of a social work qualification. The [framework for Social Work education in Scotland](#) stated—

“[Courses must ensure that] all social work students spend at least 200 days in practice learning, of which at least 160 must be spent in supervised direct practice in service delivery settings. This practice learning must be assessed. Up to 60 days of the supervised direct practice element can be subject to credit from prior experiential learning.”

The final two years of an undergraduate course, or in both years of a post graduate course, will typically include significant time on placements.

## Funding available

Fees for Scottish domiciled first full-time degrees are funded. The SSSC provides bursaries for students studying full-time postgraduate social work courses in Scotland, which currently can include support for tuition fees and a maintenance grant.

Students can apply for cost of living support. Payments are made in the form of repayable loans or non-repayable bursaries depending on the age and household income of the student and the course they are studying. More information can be found in [a 2022 SPICe Blog](#).

## The petition

The petition seeks bursaries for undergraduate Social Work students in their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years and for the criteria for assessing bursary applications for postgraduate applications to be reformed.

The petition references the bursaries that are available [to paramedic, nursing and midwifery students](#). These students are eligible for a bursary of £10,000 per year in their first to third years of study and £7,500 in their fourth year.

Another example of a bursary for a professional qualification is the [Scottish Government's STEM Bursaries](#). This provides a limited number of £20,000 bursaries aimed at individuals wishing to undertake a one-year secondary PGDE ITE course in Scotland that leads to the award of registered teacher status in the hardest to fill STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects.

Bursaries for postgraduate social work students [are administered by the SSSC](#). SPICe was unable to locate details on this scheme on the SSSC's website, however various universities provide some more detail. For example, the [University of the West of Scotland's site](#) states—

“Postgraduate Bursaries are available for nominated and eligible students studying the MSc Social Work at UWS. This is administered through the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Funding is limited and subject to a quota. Students must be nominated by the University, who will have a set number of funded places. Nominations are at the discretion of the academic teaching

team, who you should contact directly with any questions relating to this process.

“The bursary is made up of:

- Tuition fee contribution is paid directly to the University on your behalf. The maximum award is a contribution and does not cover the full cost of the course. You will be responsible for meeting the cost of the shortfall so do plan accordingly.
- Means tested maintenance grant and additional allowances depending on circumstances. ...
- Sundry expenses - all eligible students will receive a one-off payment towards placement travel and other expenses.”

The Scottish Government, ultimately, funds bursaries whether through SAAS or SSSC. In a number of questions answered last summer (e.g. [S6W-09558](#)) the Government stated, “Over the last five years the Scottish Government has provided over £25m to support the training of social workers, including for post-graduate bursaries and support for practice-based learning to increase the number of entrants into the profession.”

The [Social Workers Union reported](#) on 22 December 2022 that Jamie Hepburn MSP, Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training, has responded to a letter from the petitioners (and others) in this topic and has agreed to meet in early 2023.

**Ned Sharratt**  
**Senior Researcher**  
6 January 2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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## Annexe C

### Scottish Government submission of 9 February 2023

#### PE1993/A Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements

Response to Petition PE1993: Reform the financial support for social  
work students on work placements

Please find herein an official response to petition PE1993; which calls for  
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.

#### **Background**

Scotland's standard support package is the most generous on offer  
across the UK, however this does not eliminate financial hardship for  
students and the support on offer is kept under review to ensure it offers  
the best possible support, even under the limitations created by the  
current pressures on public finances.

David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, who lodged petition PE1993: Reform  
the financial support for social work students on work placements are  
final year social work students from Glasgow Caledonian University who  
have experienced challenges around financial hardship and are  
campaigning for change for social work students.

There has been ongoing contact between the Scottish Government and  
the petitioners since October 2022. Their campaign to reform the  
support available for social work students included contacting Ministers  
and partner organisations in a letter signed by 300 students (dated 26  
October 2022), supported by the Social Workers Union, the Scottish  
Association of Social Workers and 20 social work lecturers. They also

have raised the issue in the national press; and lodged the petition in question with the Scottish Parliament (PE1993: Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements).

The petitioners received responses to their initial correspondence from Mr Jamie Hepburn MSP, Minister for Higher and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training and a separate response jointly signed by Iona Colvin, the Chief Social Work Adviser (CSWA), and the CEO of the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Each response laid out details of student financial support and specifically the support available for social work students as well as ongoing work to review the support available.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training recently met with David Grimm and Lucy Challoner, as well as representatives of the Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW); the Social Workers Union (SWU); and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). This meeting, on 18 January 2023, provided an opportunity for the Minister to hear first-hand about the challenges facing students on social work placements and discuss student support for social work students more generally.

The points raised by the petitioners in their meeting with Mr Hepburn were captured and will be taken into consideration when progressing current work to review the support available. The Minister also expressed to the petitioners that he and his fellow Ministers would welcome maintaining an open line of communication on this matter.

### **Student Support for Social Work Students**

Social work students have access to the standard undergraduate support package which includes tuition fees, bursary and a student loan as well as living-cost grants depending on their circumstances (this package is not available to nursing, paramedic and midwifery students). There is a recognition of the challenges faced by students who are required to balance study with other commitments, as well as additional costs incurred during their time spent studying. The student support package is there to support students with these costs and the amount of support now available in Scotland is the highest it has ever been. The Scottish Government will continue to work towards our commitment to

provide student support equivalent to the living wage over the next three years.

Students who require additional support on top of the main student support package can apply for Discretionary Funds. These funds are intended to provide assistance e.g. with housing or travel costs, for students who experience financial difficulty accessing or remaining in further or higher education. They are allocated by Scottish Ministers and administered by individual colleges and universities. This academic year the Scottish Government has provided £16.8m in hardship funding to colleges and universities to support students.

### **Social Work Practice Placements**

Social work students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) are required to spend a proportion of their studies on practice placement. This is typically carried out off-site and will create extra travel & subsistence costs for many students. Placements will last for up to 200 days across the length of a student's course.

Where there is need to fund travel costs for students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to attend their practice placements, many different funding routes already exist. As well as the SAAS standard package for undergraduates and SSSC's postgraduate bursary (detailed below), each university will have its own discretionary hardship fund. The Scottish Government also offers a demand led Practice Learning Travel & Subsistence Grant to all nine social work universities to further support with student costs.

In recognition of the request to extend support to undergraduate social work students over the summer period, last year a programme was launched giving students in receipt of the Care Experienced Bursary the option to receive their funding in 12-monthly payments. The findings of this will be used to determine whether it should be extended to the full undergraduate package from 2024/25 academic year. This would include students studying an undergraduate social work degree.

### **Postgraduate Social Work Bursaries**

Currently, SAAS do not fund postgraduate Social Work courses as selected students are eligible to claim financial support from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) in the form of a bursary. The SSSC

distribute a total of £2.655m in non-repayable grant form each year. The package on offer from SSSC is overall more generous than the postgraduate loan package on offer from SAAS. There are no plans to remove the SSSC package.

SSSC are responsible for the administration of postgraduate social work bursaries and other support available to postgraduate social work students, including the Hardship Fund for postgraduate social work students. The Hardship Fund was approved by the Scottish Government and the SSSC in May 2020 as part of the Scottish Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, this has received additional Scottish Government funding to be available for postgraduate social work students through 2021/22 and 2022/23.

SSSC bursary places are limited, meaning that there are a number of postgraduate students without access to financial support. This is currently being considered in the context of the review of postgraduate funding, as committed to in the 2021-22 Programme for Government. For the 2023/24 academic year, Scottish domiciled postgraduate students studying an eligible course are able to apply for a tuition fee loan up to £7,000 and a living cost loan up to £4,500 for the duration of their course. However, this support does not currently extend to those studying MSc Social Work.

While postgraduate bursaries are available through the SSSC, all eligible undergraduate students can apply for the normal support package administered by SAAS. Whilst the preference for bursaries over loans will undoubtedly be shared by most students (and not unique to those studying social work), student loans are an element of the established student support system.

Our system for supporting students in Scotland is predicated upon our commitment to a system of free tuition for Scottish students studying for their first undergraduate degree.

The funding landscape and pressures across the Scottish Government budget are challenging and when determining the level of support available to Scottish domiciled students, 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 student support system.

However, there is ongoing work happening in this area, with the support available for social work students being considered with links to workforce planning in social work. This will require extensive further analysis and the likely financial implications against the current budgetary context, as well as wider challenges in the sector.

SSSC are also working with relevant universities and the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEPP) to explore additional funding models across social work education more widely, working with social work universities to consider collectively how to support social work students through the current pressures being faced.

As said previously the recent discussion between the petitioners, partner organisations and Mr Hepburn has also provided an opportunity to ensure the points expressed in that meeting by the petitioners can be included as part of this wider consideration of the social work workforce and support for students.

## Annexe D

### Petitioner submission of 2 March 2023

#### PE1993/B Reform the financial support for social work students on work placements

Further to the Scottish Government's response to petition PE1993 we would request that the committee considers the following additional new information when debating the issues (scheduled for discussion on 22 March 2023).

While we welcome the engagement of ministers so far, we do not feel that they have entirely understood the concerns we have raised and the depth of the problem social work students face.

It is our view that social work students work just as hard as their colleagues on nursing, midwifery and paramedic courses. Social work students have real-life case loads during their courses, actively contributing to the safeguarding of the most vulnerable in society. There can be no room for doubting the hard and demanding work social work students do on the front line as part of their courses.

The general student support available to social work students IS NOT, in our view, equitable to that received by students on these courses as implied by the government. Over 4 years, the bursaries for nursing, midwifery and paramedic students total £37,500. For social work students the basic support available is between £20,400 and £32,400, mostly in the form of a repayable loan and depending on the household income.

The additional support (e.g. Disabled Student Allowance, dependents allowances etc) are available to both sets of students. The only difference seems to be the care experienced bursaries which sadly nursing, midwifery and paramedic students are not yet entitled to.

We find it slightly surprising that we should have to point out the obvious, that a loan is not the same as a bursary - especially to undergraduates from non-privileged backgrounds.

We appreciate that nursing and midwifery students undertake placements throughout the whole course, while social work students do so in third and fourth years.

This is why the petition only requests bursaries for social work students in these final years. To be clear, we would propose that social work students in first and second years would still access the regular undergraduate support as there are no long-term front-line placements in these years.

We welcome the government's comments about reform for postgraduate funding, but would like to see a timetable for change set out and further dialogue on this issue.

We would be happy to speak further about the issues raised and provide any further clarifications which may be useful to the committee.