



08/12/2021

Dear Ministers for Health & Social Services and Education.

Following the welcome announcements of new record investment into NHS training and the recommitment to social care in the co-operation agreement, we write to bring to the attention of government key areas that need to be addressed with the utmost urgency.

This letter is co-signed by

Student social workers from Bangor University,
Student social workers from Cardiff University,
Student social workers from Swansea University,
The British Association of Social Workers- Cymru Division, and
The Social Workers Union.

This letter is to be read in conjunction with the Senedd petition “Remove the Barriers to entry to social work and encourage a parity of esteem between social care and health”, which is now under consideration with the petitions committee. A copy will also be forwarded to the representatives of the committee.

Furthermore, there have been requests to make this an open letter due to the increasing levels of support and we would like to give you advance notice in the event this action is required.

An executive summary has been included on the next page prior to the commencement of the letter. Should you have any queries or would like to discuss the content of this letter, we would be more than happy to do so.

We hope all relevant parties can work together to create a greater parity of esteem between health and social care, remove barriers to the social care sector, and that we will be the last students to qualify in such hardship and poverty. At the very least, this will require an amendment to regulations in the Spring of 2022.

Best Wishes and Warm Regards,

The MASW Bursary Campaign

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Executive Summary

Local Authorities had to adjust to decreasing budgets prior to the pandemic, which impacted all local government areas. The consequence of the pandemic will be hard felt, but this is also an opportunity for change. Social Services are vital to the health and wellbeing of citizens across Wales, and citizen-focused and sustainable services will not be possible without the contribution of social workers. The most recent data from Social Care Wales shows significant vacancy gaps of 12% in adult and 17% in children's services (including posts filled with agency staff). All projections point to substantial increases in demand for social care; thus there is an urgent need for social workers in the short and long term.

The long-standing disparity of esteem between health and social care is epitomised in the support for students. Unlike our health colleagues, and despite managing statutory caseloads in the thousands throughout Wales, student social workers were explicitly excluded from the covid recognition fund. The distinction between the levels of support and access to financial assistance for health and social care students is vast. The levels of disparity are disproportionately impacting masters students who are being pushed into poverty by Welsh Government Regulations. The lack of financial support for over two years, whilst studying and working full-time in social services, is detrimental to the well-being of students and their families. This is likely fueling the number of students who leave the course due to increasing health and personal concerns.

The current circumstances are acting as a barrier to the profession when we need more social workers. The letter details how these circumstances are contrary to Welsh Government's Race Equality Action Plan and Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care. We believe access to qualifying as a social worker should be on merit and not on a person's socio-cultural-economic background. We request Welsh Government support in ensuring we are the last cohort to have to qualify via this hardship. We ask for an immediate review of the bursary and amendment to relevant regulation in the Spring of 2022. These actions will not address the total disparity levels; however, they will provide some relief to students and their families who are forced into poverty while a more complete review is undertaken by Welsh Government.

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1. We hope this letter finds you both well in these difficult times. We appreciate there have been pressing priorities over the last 18 months, and that there will be more challenges as we progress into a post-covid climate. One such challenge we would like to discuss is the future of health and social care; specifically, its funding, capacity, and service provision. The training, recruitment and retention of staff is a key issue, and how this is managed will be critical in ensuring the future of this sector. We believe this to be an urgent matter that falls within the jurisdiction of your respective departments.
2. In the decade leading up to the pandemic, local authorities have been presented with the hard-hitting task of continually managing service provision with ever-decreasing budgets. For example, local authorities' budgets fell in real terms by 19% from 2009-2018,¹ at a time of increased demand across all local authority services.
3. The provision of community and children's services is vital to the wellbeing of the people of Wales. This can include safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults from abuse and neglect; strengthening Welsh families; empowering and advocating citizens; facilitation of care packages; promoting and enabling independence in the community; and much more. As one can imagine, this requires a multidisciplinary approach involving local authorities, health, police, education, and the third sector. However, it is often social workers who become the clasps in the chains of support for families.
4. Social work as a profession crosses many boundaries and jurisdictions. Social workers must be competent in areas such as law, counselling, psychology, advocacy, and crisis management, to name a few. Their work settings can range from health, mental health, disability, children, adults, community care, public, private and the third sector.
5. Undertaking assessments, commissioning services, playing a critical role in protecting children and the vulnerable, promoting human rights and engaging in ethical decisions such as undertaking mental capacity assessments or best interest decisions are routine aspects of the job. It is precisely for these reasons why social workers are required to be registered and trained to a high legal standard. The psychological, therapeutic, and case management elements of the role can also make their job roles demanding.

¹ Guto, I. and Sion, C. 2019. Cut to the bone? An analysis of Local Government finances in Wales, 2009-10 to 2017-18 and the outlook to 2023-24.

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6. Citizen-focused and sustainable services will not be possible without the professional contribution of social workers². In 2018, including posts required to be filled by agency workers, 12% of all posts in adult services and 17% in children services were vacant³. The pandemic will have negatively impacted the current levels of staff resources. The need to support the qualification of social workers in the short term is clear, and demand is only expected to increase in the long term. For example, the number of local authorities with a quarter of their population over the age of 65 is expected to double by 2028⁴. Furthermore, citizens requiring support due to severe dementia is expected to rise to over 53,000 by 2040⁵.
7. The make-up of the current workforce may also be an area that warrants attention. The average social worker in Wales is white, female, and 46 years old. The ratio of female to male is 5-1, 88% are white British, and only 3% have a disability⁶. Whilst we believe the sector should be proud of a high percentage of women in leading roles, the current cohort is not a true reflection of citizens receiving services.
8. A potential consequence of this lack of accurate reflection has been noted by the Welsh Government. There is a perception in the sector of a reluctance in ethnic and minorities communities to engage with services⁷. Additionally, research into how people's socioeconomic status impacts their thoughts, emotions and feelings have presented some interesting findings. For example, those from working class backgrounds score higher on measures of empathy than those of middle or higher class. Each person's socioeconomic background dictates their behaviours that can subsequently reinforce the perpetual sustaining of that environment⁸.

² "Sustainable Social Services for Wales: A Framework for Action 2011"

³ Social Worker Workforce Planning 18-19 (ADSS/SCW/WLGA)

⁴ Local authority population projections for Wales: 2018-based (revised- 4th August 2020)

⁵ The future of care in Wales: Resourcing social care for older adults' report by Wales Fiscal Analysis 2020

⁶ Social Care Wales- Social Worker Fact Sheet 2020

⁷ White Paper- Rebalancing Care and Support 2021 (WG41756)

⁸ Manstead, A.S.R. 2018. The psychology of social class: How socioeconomic status impacts thought, feelings, and behaviour. *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 57(2), pp. 267–291





9. In other words, the differences in how people from different socioeconomic backgrounds think or behave can reinforce those class barriers. As a consequence of this effect, those from lower socioeconomic or different cultural backgrounds find it increasingly more difficult to access the employment and educational opportunities available to others. We believe access to qualifying as a social worker should be on merit and not on a person's socio-cultural-economic background. Furthermore, a social workforce more reflective of society regarding socioeconomic and cultural factors will assist with engagement.
10. Unfortunately, as outlined below, Welsh Government regulations make it nearly impossible for candidates from such backgrounds to train as social workers and enter the profession. The impact from the barriers stemming from these regulations is more keenly felt across the sector when one considers the above-outlined need for social workers across Wales.
11. The lack of parity of esteem between health and social care has been a long-standing issue and is epitomised in the differential support offered to Welsh students. The lack of parity has been a particular concern for the British Association of Social Workers, who have been calling for system reform and featured such reform as a key pledge in BASW Cymru's manifesto.⁹
12. A recent example of differential treatment was observed in the Covid Recognition Fund. The payment was made to over two thousand health care students. However, social work students were excluded, even though social work students were managing statutory caseloads in the thousands throughout Wales during the pandemic. This exclusion was particularly disheartening because social work students do not have the same financial support as their colleagues pursuing health degrees.
13. For example, healthcare students benefit from a bursary of £27,000 that completely negates the cost of tuition fees and also receive additional grants of up to £3500 (depending on income). Healthcare students also have the option of taking out a full student maintenance loan, or due to the significant bursary support, can choose to apply for a custom reduced loan to help with living costs

⁹ BASW Cymru Social Work Manifesto: Senedd Elections 2021





14. Social work undergraduates must pay tuition fees of £27,000 and take on additional debt, such as maintenance loans, to fund living costs. There is a bursary of £7500 which students can apply for, in addition to applying for the loan, but the disparity between health and social care is evident. The regulations impact masters' students even more severely.
15. As with healthcare students, student social workers are required to develop expertise in university and demonstrate that knowledge in practice during placements to qualify. The requirement of a minimum of 200 days on placement dictates the duration of the master's course to that of two years. This is important because the only funding open to masters' students is the postgraduate loan. The postgraduate loan is designed for a typical master's course of a single year, so this is not appropriate for trainee social workers
16. For example, the tuition fees are £16,400. The postgraduate loan is £10,000(fees) and has an income assessed element of up to £7000(bursary). Therefore, a student from a low-income background could have access to £17,000. This results in a student from a low-income background having to live off £600.00 for the next two years. It is important to note that this £600.00 is expected to cover all living costs such as, rent, food, toiletries, clothes, utilities, vehicle maintenance due to the requirement of a car on placement (MOT, insurance, tax) etc, for two years. It is an impossible ask and places trainee social workers and their families into hardship.
17. Social Care Wales has been bestowed the prerogative by Welsh Government to support social care students when it feels there is insufficient provision.¹⁰ Social Care Wales does award a bursary of £13,000. However, Welsh Government Regulations exclude masters students from receiving the bursary if they take out the student loan.¹¹ The resulting poverty and hardship Welsh Government is placing on students who want nothing more than to pursue a career in public service is evidenced below.

¹⁰ Section 116 of the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016

¹¹ Exception 9, Section 10, The Education(Student Support)(Post Graduate Master Degrees (Wales) Regs 2019

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	Tuition Fees	Living costs support for <u>two years</u> (Rent/ utilities/ food etc.)
Social Work MA (Student Loan path)	£16,400	£600
Or		
Social Work MA (Bursary path)	£16,400	-£3400

Masters Students must choose between one of the two options as regulations prohibit a masters student from accessing a bursary and loan concurrently, unlike healthcare or undergrads who have access to such financial support.

18. The master's route is distinguishable because it allows adult learners - those with years of experience - to qualify as social workers. The added benefit of that personal and professional experience is immeasurable. The need for the master's route is clear and can be seen in the number of social workers that seek to qualify through this path. For example, between 2018-2020 of the 516 students that were entered onto the register, over a third at 154 were MA students.¹²
19. Unfortunately, some of our colleagues have had to make significant sacrifices such as placing their belongings into storage and moving in with friends and families for support. There have been others who have used their savings for a house deposit, sold personal belongings, or have been forced to work excessive hours to fight off homelessness. The make-up of the cohorts contains a significant number of mothers with children, and the burdens are being felt across the whole family.

¹² Fact sheet (SCW) Social work students on the Register 2019&2020





20. The stresses have been too much for some of our colleagues and their families, and they have been forced to either quit or suspend their studies. This correlates with the fact during that same period (2018-2020)- 102 students left the register, with 72 citing personal and health reasons.¹³ We do not believe we can afford to lose these students as social workers. There are significant recruitment and retention matters across Wales, we feel we should be supporting those who want to join the workforce.
21. It is exceptionally disheartening for social work master's students to be in this position when our health colleagues benefit from a record £227 million support for education and training.¹⁴
22. We want to note the acknowledgement and support we have received in our discussions with Julie Morgan MS (Deputy Minister for social care) and Albert Heaney (Deputy Director-General). In our most recent correspondence with the deputy minister, it was stated that "bursaries have not kept pace with tuition fees" and that the area "would benefit from a wider review... to incentivise people to train as social workers...such as considering options providing parity with NHS."
23. We have not witnessed or heard of any development from Welsh Government or Social Care Wales following these discussions. The need for reform is urgent and we are apprehensive that timescales are shortening. Due to the completion of our petition, the need for urgent reform and the pending budget discussions; we felt it was necessary to write to you personally at this time. We do not wish to detract from the support, efforts and guidance received from the deputy minister or deputy director general, of which we are extremely grateful.
24. We believe such action will achieve greater parity between health and social care and that this will remove barriers to entering the social care workforce. We suggest this undertaking aligns with Welsh Government's Race Equality Action Plan and Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care.

¹³ Fact sheet (SCW) Social work students on the Register 2019&2020

¹⁴ Record funding of £227m announced to expand NHS Wales workforce- WG Press Release 07/12/20

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25. To that end, we are aware that Social Care Wales have put forward three options to Welsh Government to alleviate some of these concerns; we would be grateful if you could provide an update on these matters.
26. Furthermore, while a "wider review" is being considered, we urge the Welsh Government to immediately increase the social care bursary for master students and look to amend regulations in the new year in time for the next cohort. The removal of the exclusions enshrined in The Education (Student Support)(Post Graduate Master Degrees (Wales) Regs 2019 will allow students living in poverty to take on debt to live.
27. We would like to stress we do not believe it is reasonable, or parity of esteem, to expect those who want nothing more than to pursue a career of public service to Welsh communities, to be forced into taking on up to £50,000 in debt to qualify as a social worker. However, the current circumstances are unsustainable, causing significant hardship, and acting as a barrier into the workforce. The ability to take on a student loan, in addition to receiving a bursary, could make the difference for students and their families, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. A custom loan, like NHS courses, would be preferred.
28. We would like to state we would not be here if not for the current levels of support provided by the Welsh Government, for which we are grateful for. However, it has been recognised those levels need updating, there is a lack of parity between health and social care, and that there are real barriers put in place by Welsh Government Regulations. These regulations are pushing students and their families into poverty and hardship. Having experienced these difficulties first-hand, we kindly request your help to ensuring we are the last cohort to face these hardships.

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Best Wishes and Warm regards,

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