

Remove barriers to entry to social work

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 24 Ionawr 2022
Petitions Committee | 24 January 2022

Reference: SR21/1434-2

Petition Number: P-06-1226

Petition title: Remove barriers to entry to Social Work and encourage parity of esteem between Social Care and Health.

Text of petition: The current Welsh Government policy is placing unnecessary hardships onto would-be social workers. Currently, social worker Masters students are prohibited from obtaining a student loan and social care bursary concurrently.

We call on the Welsh Parliament to request the Welsh Government to encourage and support social work students from all backgrounds, remove barriers to the profession, and develop a greater parity of esteem between the Health and Social care workforce.



1. Background

Social Care Wales (SCW) manages the social work bursary scheme for students studying approved undergraduate degree or Master's degree courses in social work in Wales. SCW has published guidance on the social work bursary scheme for the academic year 2021 to 2022 and the SCW website also provides information on funding for social work students.

The Student Finance Wales website gives information on finance for postgraduate Master's courses and states that a person cannot get postgraduate Master's finance if they are receiving funding from a social work bursary. It also states a person cannot get postgraduate Master's finance if they're eligible to receive an NHS bursary.

The background information to the petition states the following:

Social Work MA [Masters] students are prohibited from obtaining a student loan and social care bursary concurrently. This results in a deficit of several thousand pounds with no support for accommodation, food, utility bills, car, and general living costs for over two years.

This places immense pressures on the future workforce and acts as a barrier to the profession. WG supports our NHS colleagues with grants to pay tuition fees in full, in addition to granting access to living costs bursaries or paid a salary. Many NHS students received the Covid payment when SW [social work] students were excluded. This is despite SW students managing caseloads in the thousands throughout Wales during the pandemic.

The lack of parity of esteem between Social & Health care is epitomised by the differential treatment among Welsh students. WG announced a record funding of £227m for the education and training of the NHS workforce. Less than 0.2% of that sum would rectify the difficulties facing SW masters students in Wales.

2. Welsh Government action

In a letter to the Committee dated 14 December 2021, the Deputy Minister for Social Services notes that the Welsh Government is committed to working towards parity of esteem between the social care and health workforces and is taking steps to improve the working conditions of social care workers and to professionalise the sector through registration.

SCW is leading the development of a social work Workforce Plan which, the Deputy Minister states, will include looking at what changes could be made to support people to train as social workers in Wales, including in relation to the bursary. This is one of the early actions being taken forward under the joint Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) and SCW Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy. It is expected that the draft workforce plan will be available in 2022.

The Deputy Minister acknowledges that a discrepancy in the regulations governing student funding has prevented postgraduate students who have chosen to accept the social work bursary from accessing some student loans.

The Deputy Minister goes on to say that the Welsh Government has been working with the Student Loans Company to look at how changes could be made to the regulations to allow postgraduates access to additional funding support through Student Finance Wales. When finalised, these changes would mean that eligible students will be able to seek an additional reduced loan from Student Finance Wales, the same as undergraduate students.

However, the Deputy Minister highlights that this will require some amendment to the eligibility criteria set out in regulations, which is a process that is still being worked through, and due to the timescales for introducing such regulations, any changes would not come into force until the 2022/23 academic year.

3. Welsh Parliament action

On 4 November 2021, HEIW and SCW gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee about their joint strategy, A Healthier Wales: our workforce strategy for health and social care that was published in October 2020.

The written evidence provided to the Health and Social Care Committee by HEIW and SCW states that in areas of acute workforce shortages, work has started on

workforce plans for key occupations recognised in the actions within the Strategy, including social work.

Page 10 of the written evidence notes that a review of social work education and funding is in place, recognising the immediate recruitment pressures in social work. This will present findings as to the supply and demand for social work and the challenges faced, with comparisons made to other UK nations and other professional pathways in Wales i.e. health and education.

HEIW and SCW state that they are making ‘best use of’ the ongoing TrainWorkLive (HEIW) and WeCare (SCW) recruitment campaigns, and highlight a new health and care careers ‘virtual village’ - Tregyrfa/Careersville.

To inform the evidence session with HEIW and SCW, the Health and Social Care Committee ran an open consultation between 25 August and 8 October 2021. In some of the responses received, the lack of parity between pay and terms/conditions for social care and health staff was highlighted as a concern.

HEIW and SCW say in their written evidence to the Committee that they are working to increase parity between health and care staff, as well as within the care sector itself.

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