Findings from Engagement Sessions: Insights to Strengthen Social Work Education and Future Workforce Development

January 2025

SWEP

Social Work Education Partnership

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Glossary & List of Abbreviations

BASW – British Association of Social Workers

Blended placements - students working in multiple sites, providing valuable experiences but requiring careful management.

CSWO – Chief Social Work Officers

COSLA – Convention of Scottish Local Authorities

HEI – Higher Education Institute

ILF – Independent Living Fund

IPE – Independent Practice Educator

LNW – Learning Network West

LA – Local Authority

Non-assessed placement - offer students practical experience without formal evaluation, fostering skill development, confidence, and exploration of various settings.

NQSW – Newly Qualified Social Worker

OCSWA - Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser

PLO – Practice Learning Opportunity - a period where social work students work in a service delivery setting to meet the Standards in Social Work Education.

Practice learning hubs - local authorities or agencies providing placements for students, led by practice educators and link workers, with students either based within or within teams.

SASW – Scottish Association of Social Work

SSSC – Scottish Social Services Council

Statutory Placement - a period of practice learning in a statutory function environment.

Student hub/group - group of students working together to enhance their learning experience, serving as study, project, or support groups.

SWEP - Social Work Education Partnership

SWS – Social Work Scotland

Introduction

One of the core mandates of the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) since its inception is to develop and implement national and regional approaches to ensure consistent delivery of high-quality practice learning opportunities for all social work students. The SWEP Programme Office plays a crucial role in achieving the goals set out by the SWEP Strategic Group and maintaining accountability by reporting its progress to the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser (OCSWA). This report has been prepared by the SWEP Programme Office on behalf of the SWEP Partnership, highlighting the collective responsibility of all stakeholders in advancing social work education and practice.

The Scottish Social Services Council's (SSSC) review of social work education and Social Work Scotland's 'Setting the Bar' report provide the argument and highlight the need for robust infrastructure in social work education. The review advocates for a partnership approach to reinforce the quality and consistency of social work programmes, involving employers, educators, and other stakeholders. This approach is crucial in addressing workforce challenges, ensuring continuous professional learning, and revising educational standards to meet contemporary needs.

The 'Setting the Bar' report reveals serious issues with the social work workforce in Scotland, including an ageing workforce, overwhelming paperwork, fear of errors, and moral distress. One in four social workers who graduate leaves the profession within six years. SWEP acknowledges these pressing issues and emphasises the crucial role of social work education in addressing them. By developing critically minded practitioners, social work education is essential in developing competent and compassionate professionals capable of thriving in diverse social work settings.

An integrated approach to workforce planning is needed, aligning workforce planning with pre-qualification education. This aligns educational pathways with future employment needs, ensuring that skills and knowledge imparted during the pre-qualification phase are relevant and beneficial in the professional world. Investment is required to develop a more integrated approach to academic and practice learning, ensuring that student social workers have the depth and quality of experience that prepares them for transitioning from student to newly qualified social worker (NQSW) and throughout their career in social work.

Current Landscape

The report on workforce data from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) reveals that social work recruitment is a significant challenge for most local authorities in Scotland. Nearly all authorities, 29 out of 32, find it difficult to fill social worker vacancies due to a lack of qualified and experienced applicants and high demand for social work services. The overall vacancy rate for social workers in Scotland's local

authorities varies significantly, ranging from 0% to 31.1%. Other barriers to filling social worker posts include location and salary differences among local authorities. Additionally, the high vacancy rate affects the wellbeing and performance of existing social workers, who face exhaustion and burnout.

Training social workers in Scotland is through degree programmes, with 18 courses across 9 Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) offering undergraduate and masters' programmes. A core requirement of all qualifying programmes is for students to undertake 200 days in practice, of which, 160 must be directly assessed.

The landscape of sourcing practice learning opportunities for social work students in Scotland is facing significant challenges due to the reliance on individuals' extensive hard work and the goodwill between host organisations and HEIs. Funding cuts, workforce changes, and escalating demands have contributed to the vulnerability of current practice learning opportunity arrangements. The decline in local authority practice learning opportunities and heavy reliance on third and independent organisations underscore the urgency of establishing a robust national infrastructure to support and sustain practice learning.

Social work education in Scotland is evolving, driven by various research initiatives. The findings from SWEP engagement events are crucial in enhancing the quality and accessibility of social work education. Despite limited participation from social work students in these events, other reports and areas of work were also considered to provide a comprehensive overview. The Social Work Placement Experience Report (2024) by SASW reveals that 60% of social work students experience mental health issues due to their placement experiences, and less than half feel their placements offer adequate learning opportunities. This report underscores broader challenges within the social work sector, including a workforce crisis, and calls for systemic changes to address gaps in social work education and support structures.

Additionally, the report on Social Work Practice Learning Funding in Scotland (2023) offers a critical analysis of the current state of funding and its impact on social work. It recommends increased investments and financial incentives for students pursuing social work, emphasising the need for strategic alignment between educational programmes and national workforce demands to ensure a future-proof and competent workforce.

This report, stemming from a series of stakeholder engagement events held between March and May 2024, serves as a critical tool for shaping national and regional infrastructure. The views and ideas expressed by attendees will inform, support, and guide future work to enable a shared approach and ownership to professional learning, understanding, and accountability across key partners. The aim is to futureproof social work education and create national consistency within social work education that can be adapted to local needs.

Overarching principles agreed upon during the engagement sessions include:

1. Partnership working between higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers should be at the centre of social work education from the outset of the degree course and throughout.
2. Promoting a shared professional learning culture through knowledge exchange and research in all parts of qualifying education and social work practice.
3. Social work students across Scotland should have consistency of experience and equity of opportunity, regardless of their geographical location, qualification route, or academic institution.
4. Workforce planning should begin at the point of entry to social work qualification routes, ensuring enough social workers are trained to deliver high-quality services.
5. All social work students undertaking qualification routes via Scottish HEIs should be guaranteed that at least one of their assessed practice learning opportunities takes place within a local authority setting.

Social work as a profession is currently at a crossroads, with changing societal needs and expectations shaping its future direction. It is essential to consider both the immediate skills and competencies required by employers and the foundational values and long-term goals of social work. Addressing key questions about advocating for social justice, adapting to new challenges, and integrating innovative practices is crucial. Establishing robust national and regional infrastructure in social work education is needed to ensure that training programmes align with employer demands and support the growth and evolution of the profession. This will prepare social workers to meet diverse community needs and drive positive social change. Ultimately, the findings herein advocate for student social workers to receive consistency of experience and equity of opportunity, supporting a positive transition into professional practice to ensure services provided in communities are of the highest standard.

Methodology

Since its establishment in 2019, SWEP has been dedicated to developing and implementing a national infrastructure. Although initial proposals were agreed upon in early 2022, progress was temporarily halted due to a Scottish Government-wide funding review. During this period, the SWEP Infrastructure sub-group examined various infrastructure models from other countries, which are detailed below:

- The 'Welsh Model': This model emphasises balanced development of academic and practice skills through local partnerships. Local authorities manage practice learning with dedicated funding, and HEIs must have agreements with them. The model includes a career pathway and a framework for professional development, with a mandatory programme for newly qualified social workers. Implementing this model in Scotland faces risks due to geographical and structural differences, especially in rural areas, and the higher number of HEIs complicates placement management and supervision quality.

- Teaching Partnerships (TP) in England: These partnerships are collaborations between HEIs and practice sectors (LA, NHS, voluntary, and private) to enhance social work education and training. Funded by the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, these partnerships aim to improve workforce planning, retention, and recruitment. Challenges include ensuring long-term sustainability, inconsistent regional implementation, high workloads, staff shortages, financial difficulties, and high vacancies. A central resource like a programme manager is often necessary for smooth operation.

- Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP): This approach ensures regional consistency in social work education, aligning with Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) standards. It includes HEIs and employing agencies from statutory and voluntary sectors, with education provided by two main institutions. Benefits include regional consistency, collaboration, standardised resources, and efficient use of resources. However, it faces challenges like limited flexibility, potential bureaucracy, and risk of homogeneity. Replicating this model in Scotland is challenging due to its larger scale, structure, and variations in pay and employment conditions.

The challenge is to create a model that is well-suited to the Scottish context and addresses the needs of all stakeholders. Finding the right balance involves building dynamic, robust partnerships that leverage personal initiative and local connections, while also establishing structured, strategic frameworks that support these

relationships through necessary investments. Instead of adopting a model directly from another nation, engagement events with stakeholders were carried out to ensure the model developed is tailored to Scotland's unique needs. These events were designed to be less prescriptive and foster rich discussions on what social work education in Scotland requires from a national and regional infrastructure.

Engagement Sessions

The SWEP Programme Office facilitated 15 engagement sessions to gather feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. These sessions were agreed by the SWEP Strategic Group and were conducted in both in-person and online formats. In-person sessions were held in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen, while online sessions via MS Teams were used to accommodate travel restrictions and the busy schedules of social work professionals.

The SWEP Programme Office also participated in eight closed sessions with pre-established groups, including the Social Work Scotland Children and Families, Adults, and Workforce Resource Standing Committees. Five sessions were dedicated to specific groups, such as the team at Social Work Scotland, Social Work Scotland's Learning and Development subgroup, Chief Social Work Officers, HEI Practice Learning Leads, and the Open University. The engagement events were advertised through various platforms, including Eventbrite, social media, SSSC bulletin, and direct emails. Each session was structured to maximise engagement, with a 20-minute presentation from the SWEP Programme Office followed by a 70-minute segment for attendee interaction. Examples of questions asked can be seen in Appendix 1. For those who couldn't attend, the SWEP Programme Office provided access to a bespoke Consider.it site.

Participants

The SWEP Programme Office sent an information pack (Appendix 2) to each of the 633 participants before engagement events to ensure they had the necessary background information. After the events, the organisers sought participant feedback through an online form and provided a link to Consider.it. In total, 328 individuals attended and participated in the engagement sessions. The data was analysed to account for repeat attendees and eliminate duplicate entries; 249 unique individuals directly engaged through the sessions. This number represents the distinct stakeholders who contributed to the discussion and feedback process, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives were captured (Graph 1).
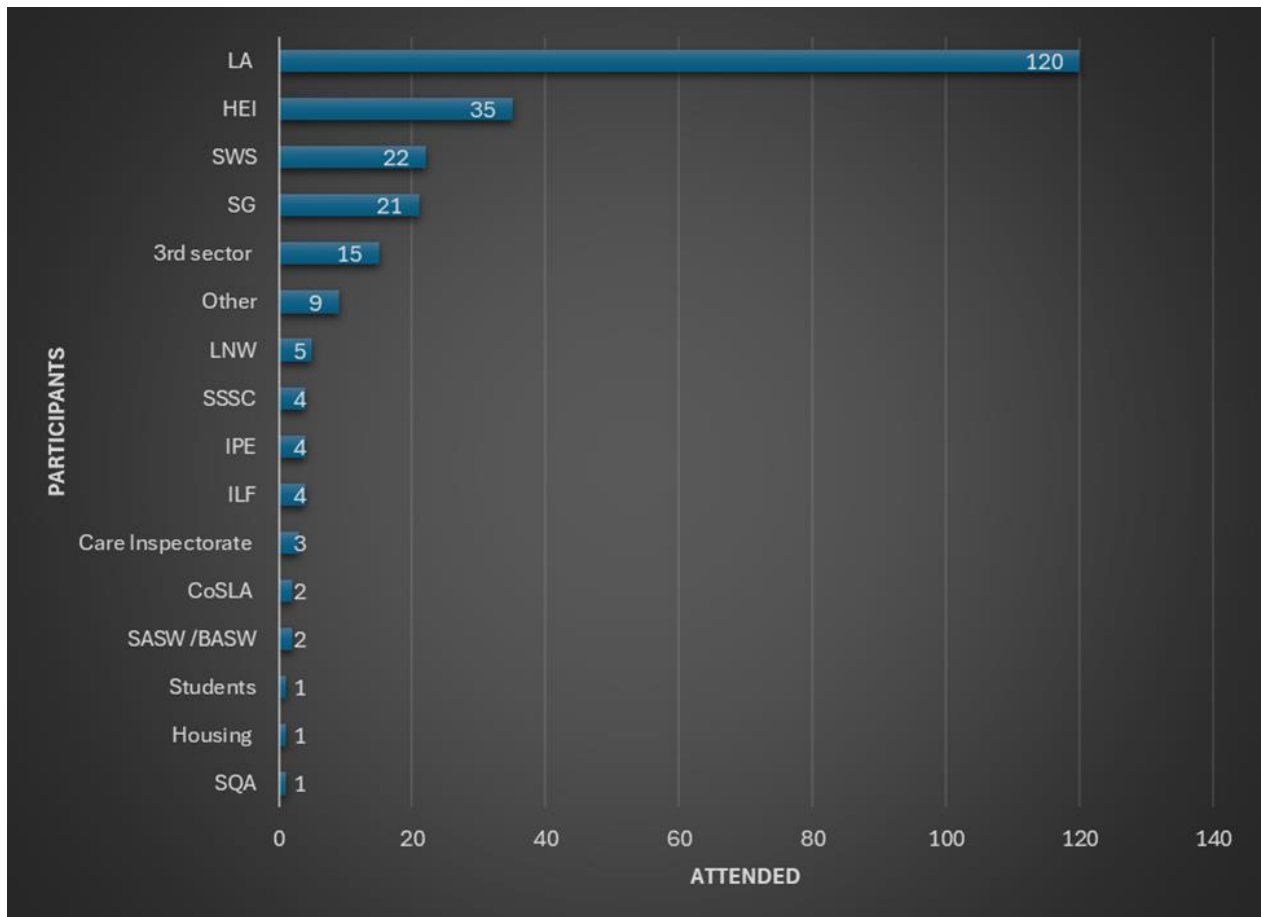
Graph 1. Unique individuals across all sessions.

Before the events, we offered one-on-one and small group meetings for attendees who couldn't make it to the scheduled sessions or preferred a more focused discussion. This approach was used by Open University, Robert Gordon University, and HEI Practice Learning Leads. All HEIs that offer social work courses, along with all 32 local authorities, participated in the engagement events.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) is a widely recognised approach for analysing qualitative data. This method enables researchers to systematically identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning within a dataset. Data for this study was collected through various sources, including transcripts from MS Teams meetings, handwritten minutes, feedback from Consider.it, and notes from attendees. The data was meticulously read and re-read, followed by a coding process to highlight significant aspects. The following key themes emerged from the analysis, reflecting the most frequently discussed and significant issues within the dataset:

- **Workforce Planning and Development**: This theme encompasses workforce planning, development, support, continued professional development, APF, and post-qualifying courses, with significant emphasis noted.

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- **Practice Education and Learning Workload**: Prominent issues included the development, payment, workload relief, and quality assurance in supporting practice educators, link workers, and independent practice educators
- **Practice Learning Opportunities**: This includes aspects such as student matching, structure, model, and learning networks.
- **Partnerships and Collaboration**: Collaboration between HEIs, local authorities, and the third sector, including communication, was a key theme.
- **Curriculum and Professional Preparation**: This theme covers curriculum, teachings, realities of the profession, preparation for direct practice, and paperwork.
- **Funding and Bursaries**: Issues related to student bursaries and practice learning funding were highlighted.
- **Inconsistencies in Social Work Education**: This includes concerns about equality, equity, and sustainability.
- **Workforce Retention and Resilience**: Retention, resilience, and protection of the current workforce were noted as important.
- **Student Placements**: Challenges in student placements, including lack of support for additional needs, were identified.
- **Alternative Routes into Social Work**: This theme explores different pathways into the social work profession.
- **Student Admissions Process**: Issues related to the admissions process were discussed.
- **Professional Identity**: The development and recognition of professional identity were mentioned.
- **Third Sector Involvement**: The role of the third sector in social work education and practice was noted.
- **Student Wellbeing**: Concerns about student wellbeing were highlighted.
- **Service User Involvement**: The involvement of service users and those with lived experience was emphasised.
- **Learning Network West**: Specific mentions of Learning Network West were noted.
- **Promotion of Student Benefits**: The benefits of having students in practice settings were discussed.
- **International Students**: Issues related to international students were mentioned.
- **Support for Care Experienced Workers and Students**: Support for care-experienced workers and students was discussed.

This comprehensive analysis provides a detailed understanding of the key themes and issues within the dataset, offering valuable insights for further research and practice.

Social Work Partnerships for Collective Impact

Engagement from stakeholders highlighted the critical importance of partnership working in social work education and practice. They emphasised the need for a systemic approach to practice learning that includes not just local authorities, but also other practice learning opportunity providers. Years of austerity measures have led to a decline in learning and development teams, posing a significant obstacle to effective partnership working. This decline affects not only local authorities, but also other organisations involved in providing practice learning opportunities. To address these challenges, it's essential to foster strong partnerships across all sectors involved in social work education.

To foster meaningful change, targeted investment is essential to address longstanding under-resourcing and to support efforts to increase the number of practice learning opportunities within statutory settings. The decreasing number of placements available in statutory settings not only leaves many NQSWs lacking experience upon qualifying but also pressures third and independent sector placement providers to fill the gap.

Creating dedicated teams within each local authority, especially in areas where they already exist, was highlighted as a key way to build a strong network for contact and coordination, ensuring statutory placements are managed efficiently. Presently, the structure, remit, and investment in learning and development vary widely across all 32 local authorities. Future investments need to be driven by needs and tailored to the specific requirements of each local area. During the engagement sessions, it was clear that social work education has been systemically underfunded and deprioritised, leading to a system in crisis.

Learning Network West (LNW) has played a pivotal role in supporting social work education and practice learning in the West of Scotland. However, its sustainability has been undermined by its funding model and will cease operations in March 2025. This situation highlights the inconsistency in support across different Scottish regions and has sparked discussions on the need for collaborative models that maintain local flexibility while providing equitable support to all social work students.

Many HEIs reported preferring direct partnerships with employers, emphasising dialogue and relationships over contractual agreements. However, challenges persist, particularly for students in the West studying at HEIs outside the Learning Network West area, who face difficulties securing placements close to home. To build a better future model, we need support and structures that are flexible and oriented to the needs of the students, not bound by hard lines. This means creating systems that can adapt to individual circumstances, ensuring that all students have access to quality placements regardless of their location.

We should prioritise open communication and collaboration between HEIs and employers to create a supportive environment that fosters student growth and learning. By focusing on the needs of the students and providing flexible, responsive support structures, we can enhance the overall educational experience and better prepare students for their future careers.

In general, the existing state of partnerships was characterised as minimal, emphasising the need for open dialogue to explore mutual possibilities rather than a unilateral approach by HEIs. Successful partnerships have seen local authority staff contributing to course admission interviews and sharing expertise. Yet, there is a call for more consistency in these partnerships, particularly in relation to local workforce needs and course content. Workforce involvement in student selection was also suggested, with the reintroduction of face-to-face interviews with local authority representatives. Though, concerns from participants about potential biases and logistical challenges remain.

Engagement from stakeholders also emphasised the need for diversity and lived experience in the student body, as younger applicants may lack critical life experience. The recruitment process for social work courses is crucial, as it ensures individuals aligned with the profession's core values and expectations are selected. Overall, a more robust recruitment process is needed to balance theoretical and practical aspects of social work training.

It was suggested that partnerships should be formally recognised in approval agreements with HEIs from the SSSC, acknowledging that:

"social work isn't just an academic qualification, it's a professional role" (social worker, local authority).

Centralising partnerships within the course approvals process would ensure that not only responsibility, but also leadership and oversight is shared between HEIs and employers, both within local authorities and in the third sector. Engagement with stakeholders reflected on the positive outcomes of partnership working and questions about why such collaborations are not more commonplace.

'When we have positive examples of partnership working, you wonder why it doesn't happen more" (learning and development officer).

This points to a growing recognition of the value of partnerships and a desire for more structured and consistent collaboration between educational institutions and practice settings.

An excellent example of partnership working between Robert Gordon University and Aberdeenshire Council was shared during the engagement sessions. This can be seen in Appendix 3. A collaborative effort not only aims to improve the educational outcomes

but also to address the broader social challenges by equipping social workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to make a significant impact in their communities.

Partnership working would serve as a platform for dialogue, resource sharing, and collective action, ultimately leading to a more effective and responsive social work education system.

Several third and independent sector organisations expressed that at present they must take proactive steps to engage with universities regarding student placements. Without this outreach, they are often not matched with students for placements, which jeopardises the services they offer due to their reliance on funding from student placements.

Learning and development colleagues expressed frustrations of having limited input regarding enrolment numbers in social work courses and insufficient communication from HEIs. This can result in a course structure where significant portions of student learning - practice learning opportunities - fall outside the university's purview, leading to promises that the university themself is unable to fulfil.

> *'I think there is a real challenge when you are a placement coordinator and in a local authority and you suddenly hear that the neighbouring university has doubled the number of students in the next cohort and you're just thinking there's been no conversation, how can they offer those students those places when they don't know if the workforce can actually offer enough placements?"* (Learning and development officer)

Essentially, this comment underscores the need for communication and co-ordination between educational institutions and workforce providers to ensure sufficient opportunities for student placements. The emphasis is on nurturing partnerships and practice-based relationships over simply regulating student intake numbers. The positive aspects of local authorities assuming responsibility for students were acknowledged, but due to a lack of placement availability, currently, this would not be viable. This is particularly problematic if HEIs admit large numbers of students in specific areas.

To address these issues, a national database was proposed to track student demographics and placement opportunities. This system aims to eliminate the current fragmented and siloed databases that impede evidence-based decision-making.

Implementing a centralised database would reduce bureaucracy and allow various organisations; HEIs, SSSC, local authorities, and third and independent sectors, to easily share and access pertinent information according to their roles and responsibilities. This would not only ensure that student placements are more consistent and of higher quality for those involved in social work education, but it could also align the training of practice educators and link workers with actual needs. Additionally, it could enhance decision-making related to the NQSW Supported Year

and the Advanced Practice Framework. Furthermore, it would facilitate national, regional, and local workforce planning and development.

The transformation of social work education to something that is sustainable and fit-for-purpose hinges on a comprehensive cultural shift that involves every level of stakeholders' organisations. It is a multifaceted process that requires a re-evaluation and restructuring of existing systems and processes that may currently hinder change, as well as the need for sustained increased funding. Only by addressing these first, can employers create an environment where cultural change is not only possible but sustainable. This approach ensures that both students and existing members of the workforce are supported through improved training and a sense of shared responsibility. This paves the way for social work students to enter a field that is more adaptive, resilient, and prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

Joint Teaching & Shared Resources

During sessions, it was suggested that an ideal scenario would involve practitioners not only contributing to HEI sessions but also participating in teaching. The discussions highlighted successful partnership models where practitioners actively contribute to HEI teaching, thereby enhancing both the educational experience and their own professional development. The benefits of joint research initiatives between local authorities, the third sector, the independent sector, and HEIs were also recognised.

Across the engagement sessions, a centralised resource hub for the workforce was considered essential for supporting continuous professional development and promoting collaboration. Attendees expressed that such a hub could function similarly to the one previously maintained by the Scottish Organisation for Practice Teaching (ScOPT). ScOPT served as a valuable resource, offering a variety of materials to aid in practice education. Access and membership were free and provided opportunities for collaboration and resource management. The loss of ScOPT was significant, as highlighted during the engagement sessions.

'Beneficial to have a 'one stop shop' or a resource hub where all this information is stored. This could be stored on the SWEP website with a portal access"

Participants discussed various resource-sharing initiatives from the past and present that could be further utilised to create a more dynamic and interconnected learning environment. Examples include developing shared induction processes, core training modules (such as e-learning), and cross-organisational student groups or hubs. These initiatives would enhance collaborative learning, diversify perspectives and knowledge sharing, provide peer support, and improve student learning outcomes. Additionally, organisations would benefit from a reduced administrative burden on individuals supporting students.

The concept of integrating tutors into placement settings to collaborate with students was also discussed. It was suggested that tutors could conduct one out of three direct

observations or participate in some supervision sessions to create a more immersive learning experience.

Engaging with stakeholders about HEI-employer partnerships has shown that everyone agrees on the need for a holistic approach, moving beyond just transactional interactions. Building partnerships between HEIs and social work services is crucial for a comprehensive, well-regulated approach to student learning and placements. A strategic perspective is recommended, suggesting collaboration with nearby HEIs to prioritise local students for placements.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of working together at a local level. This kind of collaboration is a great way to maximise resources and share learning, expertise, and knowledge. It can involve efforts within large organisations or local authorities, bringing together teams that support students in various settings. Smaller organisations or local authorities can also work together effectively.

Local partnerships ensure collaborative efforts by providing a sufficient number of student learning opportunities through blended placements, promoting intra-professional learning, and facilitating reflective learning sessions where students can share insights from their practical experiences. Additionally, these partnerships support staff by assisting link workers, practice educators, independent practice educators, and practice assessors in their daily tasks, as well as by creating and maintaining new placement opportunities.

Workforce Planning in Social Work Education

Strategic workforce planning underpinning social work education in Scotland was recognised as a key element for the sustainable development of the sector. The emphasis on initiating workforce planning prior to the entry into qualification routes is a proactive approach to address the challenges in career progression and retention within the field.

During the engagement sessions, it was discussed that funding for practice learning and teaching is a critical component, as it directly impacts the availability and quality of placement opportunities. However, it was also recognised that additional funding alone may not address the complexities faced by local authorities with high vacancy rates.

Attendees at engagement events emphasised the importance of local authorities adopting students early in their career journey, reflecting a commitment to nurturing future professionals from the onset and potentially easing their transition into the workforce. Participants also suggested that matching students with placements close to their residence rather than their university could foster a stronger connection between students and local communities. This approach could lead to better recruitment outcomes and greater investment in student development. Additionally, attendees recognised the pivotal role of the SSSC in workforce planning, contributing to the National Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care in Scotland, which focuses on planning, attracting, employing, training, and nurturing the workforce.

Feedback during the engagement sessions suggested that social work education should be a shared journey across HEIs and the workforce, involving regulatory bodies to ensure the development of a competent social work workforce. Balancing student intake with the projected needs of the workforce and existing vacancies is a forward-thinking approach that would lead to a robust and skilled pool of social workers.

It was discussed that attracting the right candidates into social work is essential, with suggestions of introducing a short volunteering period as a prerequisite for course admission to enhance applicants' understanding of the profession. Discussions also highlighted ways to engage potential students, hosting open days, facilitating discussions with aspiring social workers, and creating opportunities for direct interaction with organisations. These initiatives would not only raise awareness of the profession but also provide a platform for answering questions and engaging in meaningful discussion.

The feedback received recognised that employers appreciated the increase in routes into the profession with "grow your own" schemes viewed favourably. It was shared that such schemes can help in addressing workforce challenges by providing current employees who have extensive experience in social work settings to develop and grow their careers.

> *'The numbers of qualified social workers need to be increased, or there needs to be a systematic change to the routes into social work. We need development pathway such grow your own and apprenticeship"*

However, challenges were highlighted around the lack of funding for such schemes and the fact that current high vacancy rates can make it difficult for teams to release staff.

Attendees highlighted that the Higher National Certificate (HNC) route is a great way to start higher education and begin social work training. However, one attendee pointed out that inconsistencies in how colleges and universities coordinate can lead to unequal opportunities for students based on where they live. To tackle this issue, they stressed the importance of accessible learning courses, especially for local authority workers who want to move into social work but don't have traditional academic qualifications. These courses can serve as essential building blocks, providing the skills and knowledge needed for further education and career growth.

Apprenticeships were a topic of much discussion throughout the engagement sessions, with various stakeholders weighing in on their benefits and drawbacks. Proponents argue that apprenticeships provide hands-on experience, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, often leading to higher employment rates and job satisfaction. They also highlight the opportunity for apprentices to earn while they learn, reducing the financial burden of education.

However, critics point out that apprenticeships can sometimes be too narrowly focused, limiting the broader educational development of individuals. There are also concerns about the quality and consistency of training different employers provide.

At the time of writing this report, the Scottish Government has already announced That a Graduate Apprenticeship in social work is beginning development and will be available from the 2025/26 academic year.

The discussions during the engagement events highlighted the many challenges of integrating international students into the workforce. International students can bring fresh perspectives and diversity to local authorities, yet the complexities of visa acquisition and nuanced language skills required within social work remain significant hurdles. Financially, both students and institutions are feeling the strain. Universities, dealing with budget cuts, increasingly rely on the revenue from international students, who in turn face increasing course fees. This financial dynamic creates a tension between the university's educational mission and its operational needs as a business.

To address these challenges, it was suggested that a dual-pathway approach in higher education could be considered, offering distinct courses for those aiming to practice within the social work sector and those pursuing academic interest in the field. Such an approach could streamline workforce planning and ensure that investments in international students are increased for the benefit of both the students and the workforce. Effective partnerships and early involvement of the workforce in planning can help align international students' education with the current and future needs of employers, potentially leading to more positive outcomes for all stakeholders involved.

Retention of current workforce

The challenge of retention in social work was raised as a key issue during the engagement sessions that ultimately has a knock-on effect on the workforce's ability to support social work education. Understanding workforce data is essential to grasp the full scope of retention issues, yet there are considerations to be made within the current data limitations. Retention is influenced by several factors with attendees expressing concerns around workload expectations, complex caseloads, funding constraints, and frequent changes in policy and practice.

> *'It would be beneficial to include within the workforce development principle an aspect around building a resilient and competent workforce, then we need to make sure that is being based in well-being."*

Effective strategies suggested by attendees include investing in quality supervision, providing professional support services, and offering workplace learning opportunities. Additionally, enhancing career development, and improving the societal perception of social work are crucial.

It was recognised that rural social work faces unique challenges in relation to workforce planning and retention of social workers. The geographical limitations of

rural areas can make it difficult to recruit and retain staff. Issues such as the lack of affordable housing and competitive salaries further complicate this scenario. Additionally, rural social workers often have to balance professional responsibilities with personal relationships, which can create complex ethical considerations. It is crucial for policies and practices to reflect the unique context of rural social work, ensuring that workers are supported and that services are effectively delivered to meet the needs of these communities.

Models of Practice Learning

The consensus from attendees is that a mix of real-life practice and the full 200 days of practical learning are essential for a well-rounded social work education.

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of both statutory and non-statutory placements in social work education. It should be noted that some third and independent organisations do carry out statutory functions but for the context of this report, attendees referred to statutory placements as local authority placements and non-statutory placements as third sector/independent placements.

Placements in non-statutory settings offer unique opportunities for relationship-based practice, providing invaluable experiences that contrast with the often process-driven nature of local authorities. These placements allow students to engage deeply with individuals and communities in a more flexible setting. On the other hand, statutory placements offer a more traditional route, preparing students for roles within local authorities by exposing them to the structured and regulated environment they will encounter in their careers. The combination of both types of placements is highly beneficial, with each student experiencing both is suggested as a way forward.

Blended placements are a great way to integrate practice learning across different sectors, especially in areas where finding statutory placements can be challenging. These placements combine experiences from the third/independent sector and local authorities, creating a rich and diverse learning environment. Increasing the number of blended placements would be highly beneficial. However, it requires careful planning and data-sharing agreements to ensure collaboration, protect student information, and facilitate effective knowledge exchange.

By combining placements between the third/independent sector and statutory organisations, students gain a broader understanding of their field, promoting a comprehensive learning experience across different organisational cultures and operational frameworks. This approach enhances students' educational journey,

creating a collaborative environment that benefits everyone involved and helps develop well-rounded professionals.

> *'The blended placements would increase students experience of statutory social work roles and responsibilities by giving them additional statutory tasks."*

Learning hubs present a shift from traditional one-on-one tuition models, offering a more collaborative and cost-effective approach to education. By enabling a single practice educator to support and assess multiple students simultaneously, learning hubs can significantly enhance the efficiency of teaching, particularly in specialised areas such as legislation. This model is seen as an *"alternative to the current inefficient model of 1:1"* and *"offers students a nurturing environment and provides peer support."* Learning hubs *"allow for more flexibility in terms of meeting students' interests"* and *"support induction processes,"* making them beneficial to both students and staff teams.

The concept of a multi-disciplinary student hub could further develop educational structures by promoting interprofessional learning and collaboration. As the demand for practice educators in locality teams grows, the hub model could offer a sustainable solution to the challenges of workforce planning and partnership working. The success of such hubs in some local authorities suggests that, with thoughtful enhancement, this model could be widely applicable, providing a robust framework for student placements and professional development.

The implementation of **full-time practice educators** presents a model with distinct advantages. It allows for a dedicated focus on educational responsibilities, leading to more predictable and structured offerings for students. This model also facilitates the development of a robust training programme for practice educators, ensuring that they are well-prepared for their roles. However, it is important to note that full-time practice educators may be more costly than current practice learning funding fees would cover. On the other hand, practice educators based in teams, often referred to as "satellite" or "singleton" practice educators, provide daily, close support to students. They offer opportunities for ad-hoc reflections and discussions, and their proximity helps identify and address difficulties early. However, the dual responsibilities of supporting students and service users can stretch resources thin, highlighting the need for a well-structured system to fully support this model.

Each approach has its merits and challenges, and the optimal choice may depend on the specific needs and resources of the local authority or organisation.

Student Matching

The process of matching students with placements is a critical component of social work education. It involves collaboration between HEIs and placement providers to ensure that students are placed in environments that are conducive to their learning and growth. Engagement from stakeholders identified that the matching process and

level of information shared is not uniform across the country. In some instances, organisations are provided with student profiles to facilitate better matching, while other times, only names are provided, leading to inconsistencies.

A person-centred approach to student matching is essential, considering the individual's existing knowledge, confidence levels, and learning needs. It was argued that the final decision on placement should rest with the practice educator and the team, who are best positioned to assess whether they can meet the student's learning requirements.

> *'The significance of the matching process in placements, importance of getting it right to avoid negative effects on students and teams"* (Learning and development officer).

There were discussions about the pros and cons of a centralised database. It was acknowledged that no existing database can automatise student matching at the level where it can consider students' individual needs and placement capacity. A workable solution was seen as a database that holds the pertinent information, making the human matching element easier. It could streamline the process of matching students with local employers, ensuring that all students have access to the necessary training and statutory learning experiences. However, regular database maintenance is required to keep it up to date with coordination between HEIs and employers. While it may open new opportunities for students to work within their communities, it also raises concerns about the distribution of placements among institutions. Ultimately, implementing such a system would need to balance efficiency with the value of established relationships and equitable access to quality placements.

The attendees emphasised the importance of proximity to home in student matching, which not only facilitates a smoother transition into the workforce post-qualification but also supports local workforce development. This tailored approach leads to better placement experiences and recruitment outcomes. Moreover, integrating support for students with unique needs ensures equitable access to learning opportunities. Effective communication and information sharing among HEIs, students, and employers are crucial for this process. By building strong partnerships and understanding diverse needs, the matching process can be improved to both support students' educational needs and meet workforce goals.

Culture of Learning

Engagement from stakeholders confirmed that there is a want amongst workplaces to develop and promote a learning culture, supporting social work education, with this becoming an expectation rather than an add on. However, it was recognised that this has become even harder with the reduction of learning and development workers responsible for social work education within local authorities.

> *'The learning culture and practice placement should become daily tasks for organisations. It is acknowledged that for the national system to work, a change of culture is required"* (social worker, local authority).

It was argued that a whole team approach benefits the students by providing them with hands-on experience and team engagement but also develops the workplace with fresh perspectives.

Attendees shared that incorporating social work students into the workplace is mutually beneficial and as a profession the workforce should be championing and recognising the benefits that social work students bring. Social work students offer fresh perspectives and are often equipped with the latest theoretical knowledge, which can be translated into innovative practices. They act as catalysts for discussion, challenging established norms and encouraging a culture of continuous learning and improvement. By taking responsibility for their learning journey, the entire team engages in a process of reflection and growth.

Despite potential concerns about increased workload, the long-term advantages of creating a learning environment where students and seasoned professionals collaborate outweigh the challenges. A whole team approach to student integration can lead to a more robust, informed, and dynamic workforce.

The Welsh model was mentioned as a potential framework for cultural change in how social work education is approached in the workplace, suggesting that while it may not be directly replicated, certain aspects could be adapted to fit the Scottish context. Furthermore, there was discussion about providing local authorities with specific quotas for student social workers.

> *'Local authorities may find it easier if they were told what their cohort of student social workers should be. If they had a number that they were expected to take on each year, it means they might find it easier to justify to managers"* (Learning and development officer).

The suggestion that social work teams or individual social workers be mandated to work alongside students in some capacity, potentially with financial incentives, points towards a structured approach to integrating student learning with professional practice, ensuring a consistent and focused learning environment. An example of this was provided where an NHS substance use service sets a precedent by mandating student involvement for all team members, a practice that contrasts with the current selective approach in social work placements.

Concerns were raised about hybrid working models, suggesting that students may miss out on crucial in-office learning experiences, such as participating in discussions and shadowing professionals, which are vital for their development. The Health and Care

(Staffing) (Scotland) Act 2019 was noted for its relevance to student placements, emphasising that students should not be counted as part of the workforce numbers, thus ensuring their educational needs are prioritised over service demands.

It was agreed that the vision for the future is an environment where every organisation and team become an effective learning site, promoting a culture of continuous professional development.

Practice Education: Tackling Common Challenges

The professionalisation of the practice educator role is crucial in supporting and educating the future workforce; it bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Practice educators not only impart essential skills to the future workforce and foster continuous learning but also balance the responsibilities of guiding students, handling their caseloads and assessing whether students are prepared to qualify and enter the workforce.

Management's role in recognising and addressing these challenges is critical, as is the need for realistic assessments by local authorities into the reluctance of practice educators to take on students. Acknowledging the resource-intensive nature of supporting students, especially those presenting more complex needs, is essential.

The current variability in support and continued professional development opportunities, often dependent on personal networks and access to information, underscores the necessity for a national strategy.

A centralised resource hub for practice educators could significantly enhance access to necessary tools and information, promoting equity and professional growth. This strategic investment is viewed to greatly improve the quality of practice education while offering accessible, valuable resources for ongoing learning and development.

Moreover, building a supportive network among practice educators across different workplaces is essential to facilitating shared learning and mutual support, addressing the challenges of isolation and lack of guidance. Establishing peer learning sessions— currently scarce across Scotland— was seen as crucial. These sessions would leverage collective resources for broader benefits and promote collaboration, knowledge sharing, and professional development among practice educators, link workers, and other stakeholders involved in social work education throughout Scotland.

> *'It's like synthesis. A student placement doesn't work if a practice teacher is not supported"* (social worker, third sector).

The third and independent sector plays a crucial role in offering student placements, yet practice educators within this sector often experience a sense of isolation and a

lack of awareness about available support networks. This isolation can be mitigated through the creation of forums that facilitate peer discussions and exchange of best practices. National development and ongoing training sessions are essential. Local authorities can play a pivotal role in supporting practice educators in the third and independent sector by encouraging professional development and resource sharing. Workforce development should indeed be a foundational principle, recognising the significant contributions of practice educators and link workers in expanding placement opportunities.

Link Worker Role

The discussion regarding link workers highlighted the need to integrate the link worker role into social work standards and job descriptions. This role is crucial in providing placements and training, often under a goodwill model, but there is a growing consensus that it should be formalised to recognise the volume of work it involves. There is a call for consistent national training to support link workers. The current system may inadvertently overlook part-time workers due to the expectation of full-time availability. Moreover, there's a debate on whether link workers should also be registered social workers to effectively bridge theory and practice for students.

This highlights the need for standardised training and perhaps a revaluation of the practice education course requirements alongside a clear definition of the role and any financial or other benefits, such as extended learning time or reduction in caseload, must be nationally agreed upon.

> *'I wondered if there should be sort of standards of how a link worker should be supported to provide the best placement experience for the student."* (social worker, third sector).

Establishing national forums could further support continued professional development and ensure that link workers are equipped to handle their responsibilities effectively. Professionalising the role could lead to improved standards and better support for both link workers and the students they support.

Practice Educator Role

Engagement with stakeholders has shown just how crucial it is to ensure fair funding and proper recognition for practice educators. These professionals face significant challenges, including shortages, wildly varying pay rates (from nothing to £1,500 per student), and a lack of formal acknowledgment for their important work. While offering extra payments or higher salaries for mentoring students might help in the short term, there's a strong agreement that we need a consistent national pay structure. The

current patchwork solutions are hurting morale, motivation, professional development, fairness, and the retention of these vital educators.

The inconsistencies in renumeration for the role often result in in-house practice educators choosing not to remain active in the role or electing to work as independent practice educators in a different area. Reducing caseloads and providing supported learning time are more beneficial than a mere pay increase. Guaranteed payments for practice educators and opportunities for post-qualification awards can create a fairer environment for practice educators, recognising their vital role in shaping future social work practitioners.

> *'I think if you go on and do your practice educating and practice assessor, then you are advancing your qualifications so that should be recognised in that regard. What the balance is against depends on the setting, doesn't it? Because I don't think we can be that prescriptive"* (practice educator within a local authority*).*

The desire for greater recognition, fair remuneration, and workload relief is echoed by many practice educators who are passionate about their role but currently find the lack of support may push them out of it. It's clear that while some may use the practice educator qualification to move into management, many are motivated by personal development, interest, and the desire to contribute to the nurturing of students, rather than financial incentives. This highlights the need for organisations to consider the diverse motivations of practice educators and to provide varied career pathways that do not solely focus on management roles, ensuring that practice educators feel valued and supported in their vital work.

Independent Practice Educator Role

The role of independent practice educators in social work education has become vital, given the growing challenges posed by insufficient local authority placements. Independent practice educators provide essential support and guidance to students during their practice placements. However, the profession faces challenges such as inconsistent pay, lack of continuing work, and the need for a robust infrastructure to support their vital role in social work education.

> *'I was vulnerable as an independent practice educator in terms of that was my main source of income. And you know all you need is for four or five placements or a couple of placements to fall through, and you struggle to survive financially. That's not acceptable. We're a professional organisation, you know, social work is a profession"* (independent practice educator).

Quality assurance, consistency, and regulation are necessary to ensure that independent practice educators can deliver the high standards expected of them.

Furthermore, there's a call for a formal register of independent practice educators to enhance support and continued professional development, recognising the professional status of practice educators and addressing financial concerns related to self-employment, such as travel and training costs.

Practice Placements: Equipping Students for Success

Ensuring consistency of experience and equitable opportunities is crucial in social work education in Scotland. Recognising the diverse student demographics, including those with care experiences and caring responsibilities, ensures that all students receive a high-quality education regardless of their individual backgrounds or personal circumstances.

Within social work education, 'consistency' does not imply a uniform journey for every student, as social work is inherently broad and diverse. Rather, it signifies a commitment to maintaining a high standard of learning opportunities that are tailored to the students learning needs, preparing all future social workers with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support diverse communities. Equity of opportunity ensures that every student has access to the same resources, support, and chances for success, promoting a diverse and inclusive workforce.

This approach not only benefits students but also enhances the overall quality of social services, leading to better outcomes for individuals and communities across Scotland. Furthermore, the pooling and sharing of resources maximises efficacy, ensuring that students have access to a broader range of learning without unnecessary duplication within individual organisations.

Placements

Feedback from stakeholders has underscored the differing expectations placed on students by various HEIs during placement periods. While some institutions advocate for students to concentrate solely on the experiential aspect of their placements, others mandate the completion of assignments or additional work. The prevailing consensus is that placements should prioritise experiential and reflective learning, unencumbered by additional HEI tasks.

The discussion emphasised the importance of thorough student preparation before placements. Despite existing efforts, feedback from many attendees highlighted that they felt some students remain insufficiently prepared, resulting in failures or withdrawals. Engagement from stakeholders suggested an integrated approach involving practitioners in teaching. This approach should focus on practical skills such as time management, stress management, well-being, addressing professional burnout, and enhancing decision-making abilities.

During the engagement sessions, anecdotal evidence highlighted challenges faced during placements. A specific case underscored the importance of early intervention

and support for a student with mental health needs. The responsibility for this support seemed to have shifted to the practice educator, although it was believed that the HEI should have addressed it beforehand. While universities have established processes to address such needs, the responsibility for this support seemed to have shifted to the practice educator in this instance. It is also crucial for students to disclose their needs early on to ensure they receive the appropriate support.

> 'It should have been noted earlier really because you feel like nobody has been paying attention before that point" (practice educator).

This highlights a broader concern: ensuring that students' needs are identified and addressed well before they begin their placements. Doing so can prevent undue burden on placement providers and promote the well-being and success of students. During the discussions, there was support for early exposure to real-life practice during placements. Additionally, the value of third-party and independent sector placements in learning about relationship-based practice was recognised. Attendees expressed the ideal scenario where students receive placements tailored to their individual learning needs, rather than based solely on placement availability.

Wellbeing of Students

Although only a small number of students engaged throughout the sessions, all stakeholders involved in social work education recognised the need to advocate for their wellbeing and support. It was argued that comprehensive student support systems must be integrated to ensure a robust social work education framework. These systems not only facilitate the transition from academic settings to the professional sphere but also address the multifaceted challenges students face. Equitable access to quality education and support is essential for all students, including addressing financial struggles that can impede a student's learning experience.

> 'I'd want all students to be properly supported with financial help for travel expenses to get to placement and during placement. Changes that have happened to the travel and assistance grant this year mean HEIs are not going to be able to reimburse students for the travel expenses they will incur, not fully. And I think that back to the issue of all students should have equitable experiences…. So, for me, student poverty is a massive issue" (Practice learning lead, HEI).

Feedback from the engagement phase underscores the need to address student poverty, support international and minority students, and reevaluate the financial models of universities' dependence on international students. As one participant noted, 'We need to understand how to best support [students] to make sure that they do get the best out of their learning opportunity."

Integrating placement providers in initial discussions is crucial for aligning expectations and outcomes for all stakeholders, including students, employers, and HEIs. Students with additional needs require more understanding and investment to create an inclusive educational environment. Challenges may arise from recent diagnoses, cultural or language barriers, and specific learning difficulties like dyslexia. Empowering students to understand and communicate their needs, along with a comprehensive needs assessment and coping strategies, can significantly enhance their placement experience and streamline processes, leading to more equitable and successful outcomes for all involved.

Paperwork

Engagement from stakeholders identified that the variance in paperwork and policies in relation to placement learning opportunities not only adds to the workload but also creates a barrier for practice educators when considering taking on students for placement. There was a consensus that a unified approach could simplify processes, reduce the administrative burden on social workers and practice educators, and ultimately benefit the students. It was evident that practice educators would become familiar with one HEIs practice learning paperwork and would therefore choose to only work with that one HEI due to the additional work required to become more familiar with other HEIs paperwork.

> 'Standardisation is key. If we're being explicit, things such as the forms used by universities, placement duration, protected time for teaching, it really needs to be explicit. And that starts to form the backbone of your infrastructure" (practice educator within local authority).

A system where the practice learning paperwork is the same could lead to a more streamlined process, where educators are familiar with a single set of forms, expectations, and placement durations. This familiarity could encourage practice educators to support students from various HEIs, knowing that the procedural groundwork remains consistent. Moreover, consistency could foster a more equitable learning environment for students, as they would not be impacted by differing expectations based on their institution's unique paperwork requirements.

A proposal was suggested to create a single, continuous portfolio for social work students instead of having two separate ones for each placement. This would allow for a more holistic assessment of a student's skills and development throughout their education. The portfolio would cover both placements, showing how well they meet the SISWE in a more integrated and less fragmented way. This approach recognises that different settings offer various learning opportunities, like group work skills in third and independent organisations. It could lead to a richer, more diverse showcase of a student's abilities and readiness for their NQSW supported year.

However, there are some potential challenges and pitfalls to consider. One portfolio would require students to meet each SISWE by the final placement. This means they

might pass the first placement even if they haven't met all the standards yet, as they would still have time to do so in the next placement. This could result in more students failing the final placement if their skill or knowledge gaps become apparent.

Moreover, the continuous portfolio approach could place additional pressure on students and educators to ensure consistent progress across different placements. It might also complicate the assessment process, as educators would need to track and evaluate a student's development over a longer period and across varied settings. This could lead to inconsistencies in how competencies are measured and recognised, potentially affecting the fairness and reliability of the assessment.

A further proposal highlighted that the Quality Assurance in Practice Learning (QAPL) framework, developed by BASW, could be a useful tool to maintain high standards in social work practice learning. This framework serves as a comprehensive guide for planning, implementing, monitoring, and reviewing social work placements and practice learning. Adapting this framework to the Scottish context would require a collaborative approach involving key stakeholders in the development process. By implementing and building systems around the document, adopting a collaborative approach, customising the framework to local standards, and providing comprehensive resources and support, Scotland could ensure that social work students receive the best possible preparation for their professional roles.

Curriculum

Engagement with stakeholders has underscored the importance of preparing social work students for the complexities of their future roles. This preparation includes managing challenging conversations and understanding the realities of the job. Concerns were raised about the lack of awareness among newly qualified social workers regarding certain policies, such as 'The Promise', highlighting gap in the current curriculum. There was also discussion about centralising core teaching materials to ensure uniformity and coherence across different programmes, providing all students with a consistent level of education.

> *'We need a national approach. I would like students to know exactly what they will get and what they sign up for. I think that's only fair. And that's a very mature approach between social workers"* (social worker).

Through the engagement sessions, attendees emphasised the necessity of clear communication between university educators and practitioners to ensure the curriculum remains relevant and reflective of the profession's demands. Increased alignment of educational content with employer needs was highlighted as crucial for equipping students to face the challenges of social work, thereby creating a more competent and prepared workforce.

A recurring theme was the need for a collaborative effort to bridge the gap between education and practice. This collaboration is essential to ensure students are knowledgeable, adaptable, and ready for their professional roles. Participants

suggested that creating a concise, updated summary of university teachings for placement providers could be highly beneficial. Such summaries would help providers stay informed about the current curriculum, aligning their expectations with the knowledge and skills students have acquired. For practice educators, having this information is crucial. It helps them understand students' theoretical background and guide their practical experience, ensuring they are well-prepared for professional challenges.

Transitioning from academic life to the professional world is a significant step for social work students, and strong interview skills are crucial for their success. A recall day towards the end of their placement could provide mock interviews, valuable feedback, and an opportunity to refine their approach to real job applications. One attendee suggested reimagining the interview process more ambitiously by providing access to questions in advance. They believed this could significantly reduce anxiety and allow students to showcase their true potential, leading to a more equitable and effective evaluation process.

Realities and Challenges of the Profession

Engagement with stakeholders highlighted that the transition into professional social work can be challenging, especially when statutory placements are limited. Newly qualified social workers may find themselves in demanding situations, such as children's hearings, without adequate preparation or support. This can lead to a high turnover in positions, as new workers may feel overwhelmed and unsupported. The pandemic has had a lasting impact on social work teams, with many still recovering and adapting to the changes. It highlights the need for comprehensive support and training for new social workers, ensuring they are fully prepared for the complex and vital roles they step into.

The discussions highlighted a critical gap between academic preparation and the practical realities faced by NQSWs. The concept of professional resilience is becoming increasingly significant, as the profession faces complexities of modern practice, where resources are stretched thin, and the demands are high. The engagement with stakeholders urged HEIs to equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the multifaceted landscape of social work. This includes a thorough understanding of the political context, resource management, and ethical dilemmas, which are often at odds with the theoretical knowledge provided during training. It also requires practical skills to navigate and advocate within the constraints of the existing system. As the nature of social work has evolved significantly over the past two decades, the need for preparedness in policy, practice, and statutory frameworks becomes more pronounced. Social workers now deal with increasingly complex cases that can lead to vicarious trauma, underscoring the need for robust support systems and a realistic understanding of the profession's challenges.

"Can't move for banging your head on a policy and guidance. We are making progress with shifting the balance of care, but what is left for social workers are deeply complicated cases, which expose social workers to vicarious trauma" (CSWO).

It was reflected that, the distinction between preparedness for practice and preparation for employment must be acknowledged and addressed. While academic institutions lay the groundwork, there is a pressing need for a collaborative effort to ensure that NQSWs are truly ready for the multifaceted and often unpredictable nature of social work.

Conclusion

The main takeaway from the sessions, which included various stakeholders, is the urgent need for a strong infrastructure to tackle the challenges faced by Scotland's social work workforce. Key themes that emerged include the importance of partnership between HEIs and employers, strategic workforce planning, and fostering a shared professional learning culture. The discussions suggest that social work students should have consistent experiences and opportunities, no matter where they are or which institution they attend. Workforce planning should start right from the entry into qualification routes to ensure enough social workers are trained to provide high-quality services. Additionally, the discussion emphasises the need for flexibility in delivering qualification routes across different professional and geographical landscapes.

The findings advocate for collaborative working, with active engagement and co-ownership by all partners, developing and implementing a framework to futureproof social work education and create national consistency within the field. The SWEP Strategy Group currently holds these recommendations and will work through them to develop actionable steps.

These engagement events have revealed the importance of establishing a formal infrastructure for social work education, underpinned by a partnership model. Such a model would facilitate strategic planning, resource sharing, and policy alignment, ensuring a consistent and high-quality experience for social work students.

A centralised database was suggested in response to several issues discussed, which could streamline data management and improve decision-making. Investment in local authority learning and development was viewed as crucial to increase practice learning opportunities within statutory settings.

Finally, a centralised resource hub for practice educators was proposed by attendees to enhance access to necessary tools and information, promoting equity and professional growth. These findings suggest that a model aimed at promoting a culture of continuous professional development is essential.

Investment in infrastructure is not just about improving current conditions but also about building a foundation for a future where equity and access to support are prioritised. Developing a robust infrastructure for social work education is a proactive step that can prevent serious future challenges. A structured and collaborative approach can maintain and improve the quality of social work education, ensuring consistency in training and preparedness among graduates. This leads to a workforce well-prepared to navigate the complexities of social work practice, enhancing the quality of services provided to those in need. Moreover, a unified framework can help bridge regional gaps, ensuring equitable resources and support across different areas. Ideally, a strong infrastructure will uphold and elevate the standards of social work practice, reinforcing public trust and safeguarding the well-being of service users.

This report serves as a reminder that the efforts put into social work education today will have lasting impacts, extending well beyond immediate outcomes. It is a call to action for all stakeholders to continue pushing boundaries and striving for excellence in social work education.

In conclusion, the SWEP Strategic Group is committed to leveraging the insights gathered from the recent engagement sessions to formulate a comprehensive strategy and action plan. These will address the key findings, ensuring that stakeholder needs and concerns are considered with a focus on interdependencies, risks, and mitigations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

General sessions: Online, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen

1. Do the overarching principles reflect all aspects of social work education?
2. What practical solutions can you suggest to address the current issues in practice education?
3. What impact would you like to see from implementation of the infrastructure, what possibilities will it offer?
4. What are the risks of these proposals versus risks of no action?

Third & independent sector

1. Do the overarching principles reflect all aspects of social work education?
2. What practical solutions can you suggest to address the current issues in practice education?
3. Third sector placements can be so diverse, how do we ensure the infrastructure recognises and supports this?
4. What are the risks of these proposals versus risks of no action?

Meeting the needs of the student

1. Resilience and well-being - how can national/regional infrastructures support professional resilience and readiness for practice?
2. Practice Learning and Placements - How can we enhance the quality of practice placements for students? What support mechanisms should be in place during placements? How can we ensure consistency and fairness across different placement settings?
3. Diversity and Inclusion - How can we promote diversity and cultural competence within social work education? Are there specific challenges faced by students from marginalised backgrounds?
4. Collaboration and Partnerships - How can we strengthen collaboration between universities and employers? What role can employers play in shaping the education of future social workers? Are there opportunities for joint initiatives and shared resources? Do you have good examples of partnership working? What positives in SWE should we protect?
5. Do the overarching principles reflect all aspects of social work education?

Independent practice educator/practice educator/link worker

1. Do the overarching principles reflect all aspects of social work education?
2. For you as a facilitator in student learning, what is working well in practice education now?
3. What are the challenges with taking students – how can creating infrastructure help to overcome those?
4. What support/governance would you like to see in practice education?
5. What are the risks of these proposals versus risks of no action?

Appendix 2

Information Pack for Engagement Sessions

History of SWEP and why the need for infrastructure?

[The Review of Social Work Education](#), led by the Scottish Social Services Council, made several recommendations to improve the quality and consistency of social work qualifying programmes. One of them was to create a partnership model that would involve employers, educators and other stakeholders in the design and delivery of social work education. The Scottish Government supported this recommendation and established the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) to facilitate it.

One of the main goals of SWEP is to ensure that all social work students have access to high-quality practice learning opportunities, especially in statutory settings within Local Authorities. This is essential for developing a skilled and competent social work workforce and for enhancing career pathways.

SWEP acknowledge that there is already a lot of good practice in social work education, and we want to respect and build on that. We also want to avoid disrupting the existing work or distracting from the core tasks of service delivery and education. We are committed to working collaboratively with all partners and to ensuring their active participation and co-ownership in every stage of developing the proposed framework.

Current landscape

Across Scotland the process for training Social Workers is via degree programmes; there are 18 courses across 9 Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) offering undergraduate and masters programmes. A core requirement of all qualifying programmes is for students to undertake 200 days in practice (160 of which must be directly assessed) within which there must be contrasting experience. This is commonly achieved across two practice learning opportunities (PLOs) as part of the degree programme however a small number of courses undertake more than two PLOs (totalling 200 days).

There is presently no formal infrastructure at a national level in place that supports Practice Learning in Scotland. PLOs take place within both statutory and voluntary services across a diverse range of settings. Data from 2020-21[1] shows that nationally, 46.8% of all PLOs took place within a Local Authority setting, meaning that many students are qualifying without undertaking practice within a Local Authority setting.

The current model in Scotland of securing PLOs for Social Work students is based on goodwill between host organisations (both Local Authority and Third Sector) and HEIs. The shortcomings of the existing goodwill approach to practice learning in Scotland are

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[1] SSSC Practice Learning fee returns

well documented and continue to present challenges to all partners involved in practice learning. The impact upon placements throughout the pandemic has magnified the fragility of the current approach and the need for solutions to ensure that students can qualify on time and with adequate preparation for their Newly Qualified and Supported Year in practice. The challenges facing the provision of statutory PLOs are particularly acute, with Local Authority PLOs being on a downward trajectory for several years and in some areas over 75% of PLOs being undertaken in Third Sector Organisations.

Future demands

The Social Work profession in Scotland is facing a period of transformation, as new initiatives such as the National Care Service, the National Social Work Agency and The Promise will reshape the way Social Work services are provided. These initiatives will require more qualified and skilled Social Workers to join the profession and meet the needs of the people they support. However, the current provision of PLOs for Social Work students is inadequate and unsustainable, posing a serious threat to the future of the profession. The pandemic has also added to the challenges and pressures that the sector is facing.

The proposed infrastructure aims to address the longstanding issues that have affected Social Work education years and to prepare for the upcoming changes. It is urgent that these changes are implemented soon, as the quality and availability of PLOs in Local Authority settings are declining, leading to NQSWs lacking essential experience in statutory functions. Moreover, some qualifying courses are at risk of becoming unviable, which would have a negative impact on the profession.

The overarching principles

In researching this infrastructure, we have given substantial consideration to models that currently exist in other countries and other professions. The future model of infrastructure must be bespoke to the needs, professional landscape and geography of Scotland. We have learned about the needs of Scotland, and would like to progress with the following principles:

- Partnership working between Universities and Employers should be at the centre of Social Work Education from the outset of the degree course and throughout.

- Promoting a shared professional learning culture through knowledge exchange and research in all parts of qualifying education and social work practice

- Social Work students across Scotland should have consistency of experience and equity of opportunity, regardless of their geographical location, qualification route or academic institution.

- Workforce planning should begin at the point of entry to Social Work qualification routes, ensuring that we are training enough Social Workers to deliver high-quality services and achieve policy directives.

- All Social Work students undertaking qualification routes via Scottish Higher Education Institutes should be guaranteed that at least one of their assessed Practice Learning Opportunities takes place within a Local Authority setting.

- The infrastructure should ensure flexibility in order to deliver high-quality, accessible qualification routes across a diverse professional and geographical landscape.

We value the input of everyone who cares about social work education. We invite you to join the conversations at the engagement sessions and share your thoughts and ideas.

Appendix 3

Example of Partnership Working

The two diagrams below provide a visual representation of the long standing and multi-faceted partnership between Aberdeenshire Council and Robert's Gordon University. As illustrated many activities require a significant amount of joint working involving a wide range of staff from both organisations. In addition to the activities identified, there are ongoing discussions on a more informal basis where staff from both organisations draw on each other's knowledge and experience as well as offering mutual support.

REPORTING TO SSSC RE PLACEMENT FUNDING

RGU PLACEMENT APPLICATION FORMS

RGU AND ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF PLACEMENTS

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL PLACEMENT PROFILE FORMS

INVOICES AND PAYMENTS FOR PLACEMENT DAYS

MATCHING MEETINGS RGU/ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL

WORKSHOPS FOR PE'S AND LINK SUPERVISORS

COMPLETION OF RGU AND ABERDEENSHIRE MATCHING SPREADSHEETS

ACADEMIC YEAR 2022/2023 26 PLACEMENTS WITH ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL OUT OF A TOTAL OF 337 PLACEMENTS

CHANGES IN MATCHES

PRE-PLACEMENT MEETING AND MID-POINT REVIEWS

ID BADGES ORGANISED

EMAIL ACCOUNTS AND ACCESS TO ALDO ARRANGED

MANDATORY ABERDEENSHIRE COURSES ARRANGED

LAPTOPS AND MOBILE PHONES ORGANISED

ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL IT LICENCES APPLIED FOR

40