

<b>Title of report</b>	Temporary Suspension of Social Work student practice learning placements (COVID 19)
<b>Public or confidential</b>	Public
<b>Action</b>	For decision
<b>Summary/purpose of report</b>	<p>As a result of Covid-19 contingency plans have been developed by SSSC and the Heads of Social Work Programmes in Scotland in relation to practice learning standards and student bursaries. It is proposed that all social work student practice placements are suspended or deferred to a later date from close of business on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020. In addition, several University programmes have moved to online teaching and the majority of Universities in Scotland have already cancelled their student placements.</p> <p>This suspension of placements is to promote the welfare of students, provide consistency and clarity to students across Scotland and reduce any additional burden on the sector. The priority for the SSSC will be to work with Universities to support final year students to achieve the required standard for qualifying. This will be achieved by temporarily reducing the current 160 days of direct practice required by up to 25% and by a more flexible approach to evidence the required standard through digital learning and technology and recognition of previous learning. This will enable students and University programmes to be more flexible in evidencing that they have met the required standard.</p>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<p>The Council is asked to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Endorse management's proposals that the SSSC advises all social work student practice learning placements in Scotland are temporarily suspended from close of business on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March.</li> </ol>

	<p>2. Approve temporarily adapting the social work training requirements by reducing the number of direct practice placement days of 160 by 25% and accepting other flexible methods to evidence that students have met the standard in a different way.</p> <p>3. Endorse the contingency planning put in place to prevent the financial hardship of students as a result of placements being suspended and/or programmes having to be extended.</p>
<b>Link to Strategic Plan</b>	<p>The information in this report links to:</p> <p><u>Outcome 2</u></p> <p>Our standards lead to a safe and skilled social service workforce.</p> <p><u>Outcome 4</u></p> <p>Our stakeholders value our work.</p>
<b>Link to the Risk Register</b>	<p><u>Risk 4</u></p> <p>The qualifications framework and workforce development products we produce do not meet the needs of employers and social service workers.</p>
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<b>Responsible Officer</b>	<p>Phillip Gillespie</p> <p>Director of Development and Innovation</p>
<b>Documents attached</b>	<p>None</p>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The SSSC has a statutory responsibility under the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001 (Section 43) to promote high standards in the education and training of social service workers. We fulfil this duty through our approval, monitoring and quality assurance of programmes. The SSSC has current ownership of the Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland for the purposes of carrying out the ongoing Review of Social Work Education.

The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland sets out the requirements for social work training that all course providers must comply with.

There are currently 18 approved social work programmes in Scotland delivered by 9 Higher Education Institutions. There is no single pattern between all nine HEIs as to when students go on placement.

In light of the current UK measures for COVID-19 most Higher Education Institutions have already taken the decision to suspend social work student practice placements and move to online teaching.

## 2. SSSC POSITION

Following discussion with HEI representatives the Scottish Government and Social Work Scotland the SSSC advises the suspension of social work student practice learning placements based on the welfare of students, the additional pressures it places on social work resources and the potential redeployment of practice educators. The SSSC will issue a statement to inform stakeholders that all current practice learning placements should be suspended by close of business on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March and future placements deferred until later in the year.

The SSSC has worked closely with the Heads of Social Work Group in agreeing contingency plans. By 27<sup>th</sup> March the SSSC in partnership with employers and Universities will finalise more flexible ways for students to evidence they have met the standards to prevent, where possible, delays in final students being able to qualify. This is particularly important for final year students who have had their placements reduced or disrupted.

Practice **will** still **be assessed**, and students must be able to evidence competency against **all** learning outcomes however how they evidence their learning and competency can be done in a different way. For example where final year student placements are nearing the end of their placement, practice educators can make an assessment of competency based on evidence they have gathered to date, or where students may be two thirds of the way through their placement and are on track to meet the standards but haven't yet evidenced competency against all the learning outcomes, evidence of competency for the outstanding outcomes can be provided in alternative ways i.e. through written critical reflection demonstrating their

knowledge and understanding and how to apply in practice if they have not yet had the opportunity to demonstrate this.

In order to support these flexible approaches and allow students to evidence their competency in a different way the SSSC will provide greater flexibility of time required to demonstrate competency and flexibility regarding methods for collecting evidence of competency against the SiSWE. This will include exercising discretion in relation to the social work training requirement that all social work students spend at least 200 days in practice learning, of which at least 160 must be spent in supervised direct practice in service delivery settings. It is therefore proposed the number of direct practice placement days of 160 is temporarily reduced by 25%.

The SSSC will continue to work closely with the HEIs to understand the scale and impact of the disruption to practice placements and will co-produce scenarios and a range of options that can be considered on a case by case basis. Every programme has an SSSC link adviser who will work closely with the HEIs to ensure that any proposed changes to current provision are agreed and monitored by the SSSC as part of our quality assurance activity.

### **3. FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

As a result of the disruption to placements it is likely there will be a number of students who will need to either make up additional hours on future placements or, for final year students, they may need to extend their programme of study to complete a further practice placement.

The SSSC currently administers the postgraduate social work bursaries on behalf of Scottish Ministers. The SSSC will continue to make payment to postgraduate students who have been assessed as eligible to receive a bursary and are due to be on placement to ensure no financial hardship is experienced as a result of placements being suspended in these extraordinary circumstances. In addition, the SSSC will use its discretion within the existing provisions to provide further payments, in exceptional circumstances, from the current postgraduate bursaries budget and this will be used to support eligible students who have their programmes extended. There is currently an underspend in this budget line that is being carried forward into 2020/21 under general reserve that can be utilised.

SAAS currently administers the funding for undergraduate social work students. The SSSC has contacted SAAS to inform them of the current situation and potential impact on undergraduate students. The SAAS policy team are currently considering what financial support they can offer to undergraduate students including those currently in receipt of the part time fee grant.

The SSSC will continue to pay the practice learning fees to agencies in line with our current procedures.

### **4. QUALITY ASSURANCE**

All programmes are subject to ongoing SSSC quality assurance and monitoring arrangements including regular monitoring and support from an identified SSSC link adviser.

The SSSC currently samples 100% of NQSW PRTL (Post Registration Training and Learning) submissions after their first year in practice and would therefore know at an early stage if there were any concerns regarding competency of any students who were assessed as competent despite not meeting the full social work training requirements.

## **5. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

We have not carried out an equality impact assessment at this stage due to the urgency and potentially temporary nature of the situation. Any changes to this will be reviewed.

The proposed measures will ensure that students who are currently on placement or due to go out on placement are not disadvantaged by the disruption to their placement.

## **6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

Practice learning opportunities must satisfy the needs of students and be acceptable to the SSSC. Ultimately, the terms of the Scottish Requirements, the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) and the QAA policy on programme specifications set the parameters within which placements and their assessment must take place. It is within the legislative competence of the SSSC to make changes to the current requirements as long as the SSSC is satisfied the course providers' proposed adaptations in relation to placements and their assessment continue to enable students to meet the SiSWE and that the Scottish Requirements and QAA policy on programme specifications continue to be complied with.

Course providers' compliance with the amended requirements can be deemed acceptable in terms of their compliance with the SSSC's Rules for Social Work Training 2003 and in terms of students successfully completing an approved course for the purposes of future social worker registration.

The current proposals comply with those requirements and can be competently made by Council.

## **7. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

The SSSC has consulted the Heads of University Social Work programmes, the Office of the Chief Social Work Advisor and Social Work Scotland who are all in support of the proposed approach. We have also consulted with other UK Social Work regulators who are also currently exploring the possibility of

suspending practice learning placements and/ or the early awarding of degrees in light of current COVID-19 UK measures.

## **8. IMPACT ON USERS AND CARERS**

Non-essential contact with users and carers should be limited and individuals should work from home where possible in line with current COVID-19 UK measures. Suspension of social work practice placements will allow for resources such as qualified practice educators to be utilised and redeployed to meet the demands on frontline social services.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the recommended course of action will allow us to continue to maintain high standards of care to vulnerable service users while dealing with the difficult and unprecedented circumstances arising as a result of COVID-19.