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Via email

Feedback on Sustainable Social Work Pathways – Tauwhiro Ararau: Social Worker Workforce Strategy 2025-2030

Tēnā koe Liz and tēnā koutou workforce team colleagues,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Social Worker Workforce Strategy 2025-2030. We are pleased to see this mahi progressing, as the gap in strategic direction in workforce planning for social work has been a key concern conveyed to us by our members and other sector leaders over recent years.

We acknowledge the prior work undertaken by the SWRB workforce planning team in gathering and distilling insights from social work sector surveys. This work has been pivotal in informing trends and highlighting areas for attention. However, like many across our sector, we now call for intentional and strategic action, coordinated by SWRB as the funded workforce lead. The trends and insights gathered through consecutive workforce surveys remain largely static, as the underlying drivers have not been meaningfully addressed. Therefore, continuing to collect this data without first instigating cross-sectoral action is likely a futile use of SWRB resources.

As a co-author of the Social Work Alliance's position paper: *Strategic Priorities for Social Work Workforce Planning and Development in Aotearoa New Zealand*, we have already collectively canvassed the issues pertinent to SWRB's Workforce Strategy 2025-2030 and proposed solutions for inclusion. We have attached this paper, which we ask you to read and consider as our substantive submission concerning the SWRB Workforce Strategy.

At present, the draft Workforce Strategy 2025-2030 is scant in detail, which you have fully acknowledged and plan to rectify with contributions from this consultation round. However, because of this, it does risk disconnection with the drivers sitting behind the issues identified and the action areas proposed. Without this explicit connection, the action areas feel somewhat arbitrary; actions in areas such as Alumni/separation feel as though they are there to reflect the overarching Workforce Lifecycle framework chosen, rather than addressing a priority workforce need. This disconnect is also reflected within the action plan, for example, it is unclear who will benefit from the action '*previously employed Oranga Tamariki social workers return to practice for the organisation*' and how this will address rather than conflate workforce pressures, given these social workers likely left Oranga Tamariki due to a plethora of reasons which remain unaddressed and their move back to Oranga Tamariki would be at the expense of their employment in other parts of the sector. We must carefully mitigate against solutions based on false economy that 'rob Peter to pay Paul'.

Other priority areas for action are entirely missing, as highlighted when the SWRB Strategy key action areas are mapped against the Social Work Alliance’s 8 key strategic priorities (see table 1 below). Concerningly, any focus on achieving *ōritetanga* for Māori is missing, we see this as a fundamental requirement under SWRB’s own Code of Conduct and our wider professional standards, which recognise Te Tiriti o Waitangi. MBIE’s Te Mahere Whai Mahi Māori (Māori Employment Action Plan) is referenced on page 16, but through this, it feels as though the responsibility to consider and invest in Māori workforce has been outsourced. Surely, upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi by considering specifically how *ōritetanga* (Article 3) can be achieved, should equally apply to social work workforce planning?

Table 1: SW Alliance Workforce priorities/SWRB Workforce areas comparison table

SW Alliance’s 8 Priorities	SWRB Strategy Key Areas	SWRB Action Plan
Increase the supply of locally trained social workers.	Attraction and recruitment: Ensuring initial New Zealand social work education programmes are fit for purpose and sustainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide a pathway into social work for students on placement, into permanent employment with Oranga Tamariki, providing the bridge to registration and a social worker career. (OT) ○ Attract more early career, experienced and international social work candidates. (OT) ○ Attract more students into health careers. (TWO) ○ Streamline tertiary training programmes. (TWO) ○ Encouraging more school students to explore social work as a career. (TEC/SWRB)
Increase the number of overseas qualified social workers.	Attraction and recruitment: Improving overseas qualification recognition processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Attract more early career, experienced and international social work candidates. (OT) ○ Streamline the overseas pathway to enter the profession. (SWRB)
Increase the number of social workers with a practising certificate.	Induction and Onboarding: Strengthening support for new social workers Attraction and Recruitment: Making social work an appealing and inclusive profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Induction and skills development support necessary for social workers employed in Oranga Tamariki’s statutory child protection setting. (OT) ○ Streamline return to practice processes (SWRB)
Ensure pathways exist for the recognition of prior learning and experience to lead to social work registration.	Attraction and recruitment: Developing clear pathways into the profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develop an additional staircased pathway into the social work profession. (SWRB) ○ Consider potential opportunities to broaden

		pathways into the social work profession. (MSD)
Ensure equitable workforce outcomes for Māori and Pacific social workers.	<i>Gap – no aligned areas</i>	
Ensure role clarity, coordination and collaboration with the social work-like workforce.	<p>Induction and onboarding: Establishing clear professional expectations.</p> <p>Learning and skills development: Expanding professional development opportunities</p> <p>Learning and skills development: Supporting ongoing education and specialisation</p> <p>Reward and recognition: Improving recognition of social work contribution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Train an additional 500 Mental Health and Addiction Professionals per year. (TWO) ○ Upskill the Mental Health and Addictions Workforce. (TWO)
Promote retention of current social workers.	<p>Retention: Addressing workplace stress and burnout</p> <p>Retention: Improving work conditions and support.</p> <p>Reward and recognition: Addressing remuneration issues</p> <p>Career progression: Creating clear career pathways</p> <p>Career progression: Supporting leadership development</p> <p>Alumni/Separation: Maintaining connections with experienced practitioners</p> <p>Alumni/Separation: Utilising retired social workers' expertise for mentoring</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Development of Advanced Practitioner and Leadership Development pathways for social workers with more than two years' experience to remain within the workforce. (OT)
Improve digital capability, prepare for a future-orientated, tech-enabled profession.	<i>Gap – no aligned areas</i>	

It is also evident that limited consultation has occurred during the development of this draft, as actions only identify Oranga Tamariki, Te Whatu Ora, TEU, MSD and SWRB as delivery partners. To the sector, this feels abrasive, as entire stakeholder groups and agency types, most notably iwi and kaupapa Māori agencies, are missing in this 'stocktake'. Often, social work is misrepresented in both political and public arenas as only Oranga Tamariki or mental health. At present, the action plan amplifies this unhelpful narrative, forgetting the breadth and diversity of social work, which is curious given that SWRB, as the regulator, has the most complete picture of the spaces where social work exists. We hope this will be corrected during this consultation, illuminating the unseen contributions and conveying this diverse picture of our sector to Ministers and officials who will oversee this mahi. We do hold some reservations, however, as without targeted engagement, SWRB is reliant on written submissions or feedback gathered by the small number of attendees across 2 webinars to gather this information. From experience, such consultation methods do not result in information or consensus representative of the wider profession.

In the future, we strongly recommend that SWRB considers their engagement strategy and prioritises co-development processes with the likes of ourselves, the Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association, the Council of Social Work Educators Aotearoa New Zealand, iwi and kaupapa Māori providers and NGOs, not just large statutory entities. This draft also feels rushed, whereas we wonder why a co-development process could not have been initiated when the first Workforce Survey Report was published back in 2018.

Additionally, we hold grave concern that both the strategy and action plan fail to highlight that the most significant driver behind our workforce challenges is continued underinvestment by the Government into health and social services. Attraction, recruitment and retention are unlikely to improve within a funding environment that is openly hostile to creating adequate working conditions, such as safe caseloads, hours and staffing numbers and liveable pay. Our 'workforce crisis' is a social construct manufactured by successive government policy decisions that continue to devalue the lives of the whānau and communities we support, and subsequently, the social workers who support them.

We implore you, as advisor to the Minister, to strongly convey the need for investment in health and social services to enable working conditions to be improved and investment in evidence-based workforce innovations for social work. Within the current environment of funding scarcity, we simply cannot see how any Workforce Strategy and Action Plan, no matter the quality of content, will resolve these challenges.

Ngā mihi mahana,



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