

Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau

Action Plan
2025 – 2028

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Author: The Social Workers Registration Board

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Minister's foreword (tbc)

As the Minister for Social Development and Employment, I am pleased to present the Government's first cross-system Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan: ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*** which supports a sustainable, competent and safe, culturally responsive social worker workforce.

The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), as the lead agency for social worker workforce planning has developed the Social Worker Workforce Strategy and this partner Action Plan.

This Action Plan now sets out cross-government and sector commitments to deliver ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*** the Social Worker Workforce Strategy.

It has been a major collaborative effort developing this Action Plan, and I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to its development and who will now be responsible for its delivery.

This Action Plan is designed to collectively address social worker workforce sustainability challenges over the next three years and builds incrementally on the work already undertaken year by year.

My ministerial colleagues and I have committed to rise to these challenges. Working together we will ensure that the value Aotearoa New Zealand gains from our social work profession is maximised for the benefit of New Zealanders. We will meet regularly to oversee the Strategy's implementation and check agencies progress against this Action Plan.

Hon Louise Upston

Minister for Social Development and Employment

XXXX 2025

Signatories to this action plan - Child and Youth Ministers

Hon Simeon Brown
Minister of Health

Hon Matt Doocey
Minister of Mental Health and Youth

Hon Karen Chhour
Minister for Children with responsibility for Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Children

Hon Nicola Willis
Minister for Social Investment

Hon Erica Stanford
Minister of Education

Hon Chris Bishop
Minister of Housing

Hon Paul Goldsmith
Minister of Justice

Hon Mark Mitchell
Minister of Police and Corrections

Hon Tama Potaka
Minister for Māori Development

Portfolios of interest

Vocational Education

Universities

Women

Regional Development

Regulation

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Introduction

Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau, the Social Worker Workforce Strategy is the first cross-system strategy to address the sustainability challenges facing the social worker workforce across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Social workers are essential frontline professionals who work with some of New Zealand's most vulnerable individuals, families, whānau and communities and are employed across the full range of health and social services. Social work is in a unique position as a regulated profession within a largely unregulated social services sector and supports some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Across government there are over 80 public sector agencies and approximately 600 Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) funded through government contracts who directly employ social workers.

On 30 June 2024 there were approximately 9,000 registered social workers holding a practicing certificate.

- 29% of them work for NGOs,
- 22% work for Oranga Tamariki and
- 21% work in health organisations, including mental health and addictions services and primary care.
- 9% work in iwi-based organisations
- 12% work across other sectors including education, Pacific organisations, private practice/self-employed, and in other government agencies
- 7% do not specify a current employer.

This means that most social workers are either directly employed in the public sector, by government agencies or indirectly through government funded contracts.

Our challenge

We know we have challenges across all elements of the workforce life cycle, from attraction and recruitment, through to learning and skills development, career progression and retention.

High caseloads, burnout and an ageing workforce are all retention challenges facing employers.

Put simply, with too few social workers entering the profession, and many more likely to leave in the next five to ten years, we have a social worker workforce sustainability crisis that no single agency or employer can solve alone.

Key workforce insights from SWRB surveys, research and published reports drawn from across the social work sector have informed the development of the ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau***, priorities and actions.

At a high level we know that there is increased demand for social workers, but not enough students are completing their studies. At the same time, more experienced social workers are signaling that they plan to retire in the next five years:

- the picture is one of increasing workforce sustainability challenges across all elements of the workforce life cycle, but particularly in attraction and recruitment (pipeline) and retention
- in recent years this picture has been exacerbated by an increase in demand for social workers and social work services, due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, natural disasters such as Cyclone Gabrielle and the ageing of New Zealand's population
- pressure at both workforce entry and exit points with declining student completion rates resulting in fewer social workers entering the profession, alongside significant numbers of social workers signaling they will be leaving the profession in the next five years results in a projected net loss in numbers overall.

From collaborative data modelling work across the system, we know:

- it is difficult to accurately measure future demand for a particular workforce and social work is no different
- collaborative work with Manatu Hauora/Ministry of Health's data modelling team suggests in addition to filling the 700 known vacancies, that conservatively an additional 142 full-time equivalent social workers need to enter the workforce annually, over the next ten years, to meet current

demand for social work services.

Under current legislation there are three entry pathways into the social work workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand. These are as:

- a newly qualified New Zealand graduate (86%)
- as a social worker coming from overseas, with a recognised overseas qualification (12%)
- as an applicant through the Experience Pathway (2%).

The Experience Pathway is closing in 2026. While relatively few social workers enter the profession via this route, it has been a valuable option following the shift to mandatory registration, particularly for experienced Tangata Whenua practitioners who may not have a formal social work qualification. The Ministry for Social Development is exploring other options because of this pathway closure.

Taking account of the attrition rate of social work students and workforce entry rate, we estimate that we need an extra 373 enrolled students per annum over the next ten years.

This Action Plan details the activities required for us to achieve our Vision and meet our Goal to support a sustainable, competent and safe, culturally responsive social worker workforce to deliver high quality social work services to those New Zealanders that need them most

Our vision

Our vision is for Aotearoa New Zealand to have enough social workers, with the right skills, knowledge and competencies in the right place, at the right time and at the right cost, to support New Zealanders to lead happier, healthier and more productive lives.

Our goal

Our goal is to support a sustainable, competent and safe, culturally responsive social worker workforce to deliver high-quality social work services to those New Zealanders that need them most.

The Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) has already undertaken significant work as the Lead Agency for Workforce Planning for all social workers. The SWRB's role to date has focused on building workforce knowledge, developing robust evidence and developing relationships, to better understand the workforce challenges we are facing. This work will continue to provide the foundation for our on-going approach and ensure our actions are underpinned by robust data and evidence.

Building from this foundation, SWRB is now turning its attention towards the actions that are needed across the system to better support more informed and targeted workforce decision making. We are making the best use of workforce intelligence and ensuring that we have the right people and competencies in the right place, to deliver high quality social work services.

The SWRB has developed ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*** the Social Worker Workforce Strategy and this partner Action Plan to unite agencies, social work employers, and educators to ensure that their individual agency-level strategies align.

This is about ensuring we are all heading in the same direction, supporting effective strategic operational decision making. The Strategy and Action Plan will help agencies with their future planning and prioritisation and will provide agencies with a mechanism for on-going analysis and decision making.

The SWRB's own actions focus on streamlining regulatory processes to make it quicker for qualified and competent social work applicants to become registered and enter the workforce.

The SWRB will also be responsible for refreshing the Strategy and Action Plan on Government's behalf. The Strategy, Action Plan, monitoring reports and other workforce

planning information will be made publicly available.

The Minister for Social Development and Employment is responsible for the Strategy and progress against this Action Plan. The Minister chairs a Ministerial Steering Group made up of the Child and Youth Ministers, that meets regularly to oversee the Strategy's implementation, and members are signatories to this Action Plan.

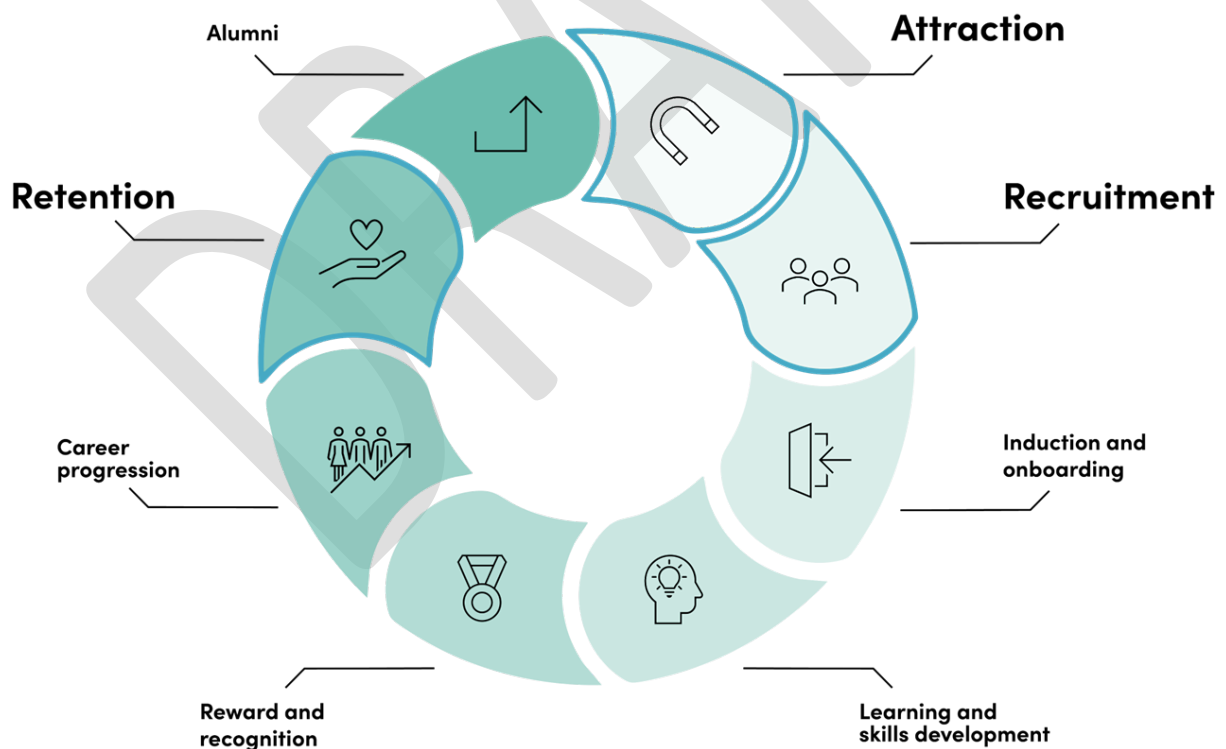
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Key action areas

Our key action areas for increasing social worker workforce sustainability

This Action Plan focuses on actions that responsible agencies and other organisations will deliver across each of the eight Workforce Lifecycle components, but with a particular focus on Attraction and Recruitment (Pipeline) and Retention activities.

Workforce lifecycle components and key areas of focus



Our two key areas of focus

Pipeline:



Attraction and recruitment

To include:

- Ensuring initial New Zealand social work education programmes are fit for purpose and sustainable
- Making social work an appealing and inclusive profession
- Developing clear pathways into the profession
- Streamlining entry for qualified applicants
- Improving overseas qualification recognition processes.

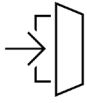


Retention

To include:

- Addressing workplace stress and burnout
- Improving work conditions and support.

Additional areas to address



Induction & onboarding

To include:

- Strengthening support for new social workers
- Establishing clear professional expectations.



Learning & skills development

To include:

- Expanding professional development opportunities
- Supporting ongoing education and specialisation.



Reward & recognition

To include:

- Addressing salary issues
- Improving recognition of social work contribution.



Career progression

To include:

- Creating clear career pathways
- Supporting leadership development.



Alumni

To include:

- Maintaining connections with experienced practitioners
- Utilising retired social workers' expertise for mentoring.

Work already underway will continue

This Action Plan builds on work that is already underway and is already seeing benefits for workforce sustainability.

Given the need to attract and recruit more social work students into the social work pipeline and encourage more qualified social workers to remain in the profession, the action plan will focus on:

- **Pipeline** (Attraction and Recruitment) ensuring that social work is an appealing, inclusive and attractive profession, that initial New Zealand social work education programmes are fit for purpose and sustainable and that all those who are appropriately qualified can enter the profession and
- **Retention** creating incentives and addressing workload pressures to prevent social workers from leaving the workforce.

It will remain the responsibility of agencies, and NGOs (funded through Government contracts), as the employers of social workers to develop and deliver their own workforce development plans to address the challenges facing the social workers they employ.

Many of the actions, agencies are taking are interconnected and several levers contribute to success. By working on these actions in parallel, we hope to drive improvements across multiple areas and achieve better outcomes more quickly.

How we will track progress

Action Tables



Attraction and recruitment

Attraction: Being an appealing, inclusive, and attractive profession. Includes education providers and funders attracting and broadening the potential pool of students into social work programmes, ensuring initial New Zealand social work education programmes are fit for purpose and sustainable and increasing the potential pool of workers who could be social workers in the future.

Recruitment: Enabling all those appropriately qualified applicants to enter the New Zealand social worker workforce. This includes employers' recruitment processes being inclusive and efficient, as well as exploring options to expand entry pathways to qualification, and registration.

Being an appealing, inclusive and attractive profession and enabling all those appropriately qualified applicants to enter the workforce		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)
Oranga Tamariki	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.	Trial of a temporary Allied Support Worker role, as an assistant to a team of social workers. The trial was successful and now an Expression of Interest will be launched targeting current students on placement and in their final year of study.
Oranga Tamariki	Attract more early career, experienced and international social work candidates.	Develop an Attraction Strategy by February 2025 to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• EOI process for candidates wishing to explore a career in social work, but who are not yet ready to apply for a vacancy• Partnering with a specialist international

		recruitment and immigration agency.
Te Whatu Ora	Attract more students into health careers.	Launch a national attraction campaign to get students interested in health centres.
Te Whatu Ora	Streamline tertiary training programmes.	Redesign tertiary education (working with the tertiary education sector) pathways to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> align training times globally introduce more flexibility. to support student attraction and attrition.
Te Whatu Ora	Match tertiary training capacity to projected future needs.	Review all workforce demand modelling to 2035 and outline tertiary training growth required.
Te Whatu Ora Mental Health and Addictions	Train additional 500 Mental Health and Addiction Professionals per year.	Including New Entrant to Specialist Practice (NESP) including for Social Workers and Occupational Health.
SWRB	Streamline the overseas pathway to enter the profession.	Enhance current process for overseas applicants through the overseas pathway and develop a Pilot to test a streamlined approach by June 2025.
SWRB	Develop an additional staircased pathway into the social work profession.	Develop an Assistant Social Worker Scope of Practice in collaboration with a government employer and education and training provider/WDC. Timing and resources TBD.
Ministry of Social Development	Consider potential opportunities to broaden pathways into the social work profession.	MSD is considering potential opportunities to broaden entry pathways into the social worker workforce.
Tertiary Education Commission/SWRB	Encouraging more school students to explore social work as a career.	Support SWRB to engage with current social workers to become role models across every region in the country, through the Inspiring the Future programme in primary and secondary schools
Tertiary Education Commission/SWRB	Provide up-to-date, relevant information regarding social worker	Ensuring the TEC careers planning website, Tahatū

	careers, that is accessible particularly in secondary schools.	Career Navigator has full information about social workers, including case studies.
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Retention

Retention: addressing workload pressures to prevent attrition and creating incentives to remain in the workforce through strengthening support for professional requirements such as supervision and continued professional development.

Addressing attrition rates and creating incentives to remain in the workforce		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)
Oranga Tamariki	Development of Advanced Practitioner and Leadership Development pathways for social workers with more than two years' experience to remain within the workforce.	Leaders in Practice programme, Kaitiakitanga Post Graduate Supervision programme in place. Elective modules for specialist learning under development.



Induction & onboarding

Induction and Onboarding: Supporting social workers to better understand workplace and workforce expectations This includes employers improving support for new entrants to practise including new to New Zealand practise via specific entry level programmes.

Supporting social workers to better understand workplace/force expectations		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)
Oranga Tamariki	Induction and skills development support necessary for social workers employed in Oranga Tamariki's statutory child protection setting.	20-week Puāwai Practice Induction Programme commenced for all new social workers in January 2023. This 5–8 week programme will continue for all new social work employees and is being extended from April 2025 to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professional Development for social work leaders• Regional learning advisor and communities of practice.



Learning & skills development

Learning and Skills Development: improving opportunities for social worker skills development and additional learning opportunities.

Improving opportunities for social worker skill development and learning		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)
Te Whatu Ora Mental Health and Addictions	Upskill the Mental Health and Addictions Workforce.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funded places available for social workers to undertake further post graduate training• Training and seminars available to social workers through the Mental Health and Addictions workforce centres• Development of a national framework for Nursing and Allied Health (including social workers) Responsible Clinicians.



Reward & recognition

Reward and Recognition: addressing salary distribution and pay parity as these issues are noted as barriers.

Addressing salary distribution and pay parity issues that are noted as barriers		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)



Career progression

Career Progression: providing career progression pathways (other than moving into management positions) for social workers with significant experience and expertise, e.g. specialist roles/scopes of practice.

Providing career progression pathways for experienced/expert social workers		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)

Alumni

Alumni outreach/Re-entering the workforce: Maximising the potential for experienced social workers to re-enter the workforce to provide support and mentoring to developing practitioners. Examples from overseas include Retire to Return programmes which may have merit in exploring further.

Maximising outreach and workforce re-entry opportunities for most experienced		
Who will deliver (Agency)	What needs to happen (including volumes)	How will it be achieved (including by when)
Oranga Tamariki	Previously employed Oranga Tamariki social workers return to practice for the organisation.	Develop an alumni campaign showcasing the change in practice approach to encourage social workers to return.
SWRB	Streamline return to practice processes	Return to Practice Policy Review by April 2025

Governance

The Minister for Social Development and Employment will oversee the delivery of the ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau***.

The Child and Youth Ministers make up the Ministerial Steering Group, which includes nine Ministers whose portfolios align with actions in this Action Plan. In addition, five Ministers have portfolios of interest, which are key to meeting the sustainability crisis facing the social worker workforce.

This Group of Ministers will be working with their agencies to ensure they deliver agreed actions.

Monitoring

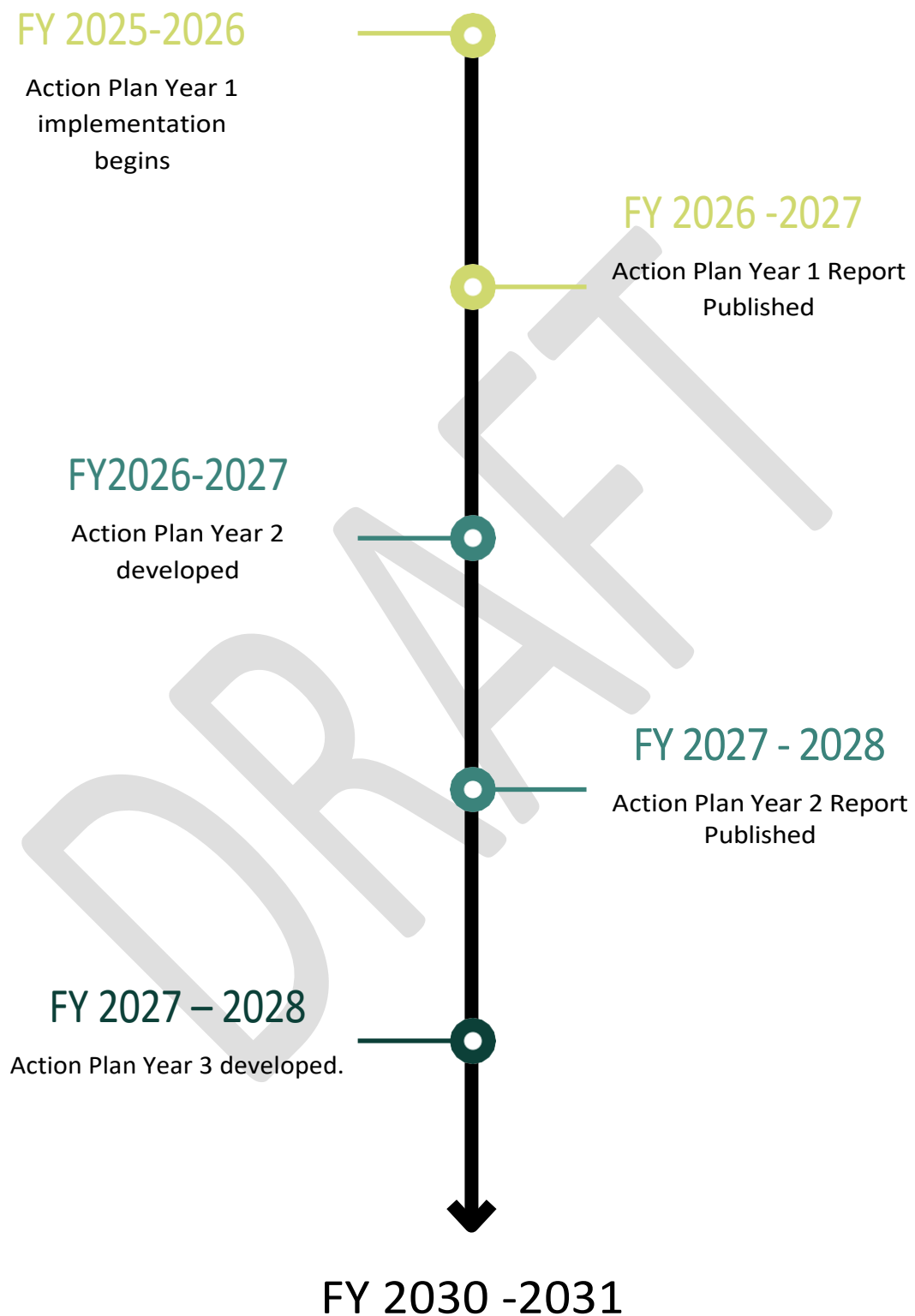
An Officials Steering Group currently supports the Ministers Group and will work with the SWRB and through MSD to track progress on the implementation of the Action Plan, identify and mitigate risks, and adjust priorities as necessary.

In accordance with its mandate the SWRB will publicly report on progress on this Action Plan and up to five yearly, update the ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*** Strategy, as relationships with cross system agencies build and develop.

These Reports and updates will be published on the SWRB website.

www.swrb.govt.nz

Timelines and milestones



1. Five-year review of *Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau* the Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan.

Appendix 1 - Actions by workforce lifecycle component

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Appendix 2 - Actions by responsible agency/stakeholder

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Kāhui
Whakamana
Tauwhiro

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