

Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau 2025-2030

Social Worker Workforce Strategy – Government's first strategy to address the sustainability challenges facing the social worker workforce across Aotearoa New Zealand

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The strategy

The SWRB, in collaboration with other government agencies, and sector organisations has developed this first cross-system Social Worker Workforce Strategy and partner Action Plan ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*** to collectively address sustainability challenges facing Aotearoa New Zealand's social worker workforce.

It is important that we all actively work together to ensure that New Zealand has a safe and sustainable social worker workforce, as social workers play a key role in supporting the lives of people experiencing significant vulnerability.

Our challenge

We know there are challenges across all components of the workforce lifecycle, 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.

Our vision

The 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

The 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.

Purpose of the strategy

The purpose of *Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*, the Social Worker Workforce strategy is to:

- **provide visibility in one place of existing social worker initiatives underway across government and sector agencies**
- **enable more effective strategic and operational social worker workforce decision making** by government and agencies, including employers, education institutes and service delivery agencies centrally and regionally
- **support agencies future social worker workforce planning** to ensure there is a sustainable supply of social workers to keep up with demand and address supply challenges
- **provide a mechanism for ongoing social worker workforce analysis, and to supply evidence to guide future workforce planning**, including monitoring of demographic changes, better reflecting increasing diversity of New Zealand communities, providing commentary on shifting employer expectations, and the ability to recruit from overseas, providing data around social work student attrition rates and course funding.

The case for change

Why focus on the social worker workforce?

Social workers provide invaluable support to New Zealand's most vulnerable; they contribute to achieving better outcomes for those in need and support many of our critical service workforces. They provide added value to Aotearoa New Zealand and proven returns on investment. They are a vital, important and largely government funded workforce.

Distribution of the workforce

- There are approximately 9,000 registered social workers who hold practicing certificates
- 29% work in non-government organisations (NGOs)
- 22% work for Oranga Tamariki
- 21% work in Health services
- 9% work in Iwi-based Kaupapa Māori organisations
- 12% work across other sectors including education, Pacific organisations, private practice/self-employed, and in other government agencies, such as Police, Corrections and New Zealand Defence Force
- 7% do not specify a current employer.

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

In frontline essential roles, social workers provide culturally responsive support aligned with Tiriti o Waitangi principles. Their expertise extends from crisis response to early interventions and delivering therapeutic support. They provide interventions to address family violence/sexual violence and protect vulnerable children and adults at risk. They provide educational support in schools, healthcare navigation and advocacy for marginalized populations.

Additionally, social workers have an essential role in supporting our critical service workforces including; New Zealand Defence Force, Police, Corrections and Fire and Emergency services to address issues of occupational stress, and staff health and wellbeing.

This means that social workers not only bring a wide range of experience, and transferrable skills, across agencies and sectors, to support our most vulnerable, they also enable others to provide Aotearoa New Zealand's critical emergency, justice and defence services.

Evidence within New Zealand and from overseas demonstrates positive returns on investment and added value from social work services.

In 2015, the New Zealand Productivity Commission reported that having well implemented social work programs produced cost savings of approximately NZ\$3-5 for every dollar invested, primarily through reduced downstream costs in healthcare, corrections, and social welfare.¹

In 2020, Oranga Tamariki also found that investments in New Zealand's social work programs focusing on early intervention produced significant cost savings across multiple government sectors.²

Evaluation of social work programs delivered by NGOs also show positive returns on investment. Barnardo's LEAP Service (designed to keep vulnerable children safe and to reduce the risk of maltreatment, particularly where there are complex and multiple needs) was evaluated by Impact Lab in 2021. The evaluation showed that for every dollar invested \$18.01 of measurable good was delivered to New Zealand.³

International evidence also indicates that when social workers are active in a community, it has a positive impact on downstream outcomes, such as crime rates, health statistics, school attendance and employment.^{4 5 6 7}

¹ New Zealand Productivity Commission (2015) - "More Effective Social Services" report evaluated social work interventions across New Zealand

² Oranga Tamariki - Early Intervention - A synthesis of recent research and evaluations. September 2020

³ Impact Lab Good Measure Report into Barnardos LEAP service: April 2021

⁴ Allen, G. (2011). Early Intervention: The Next Steps. HM Government UK. This report details how social workers are positioned as key professionals in effective early intervention systems.

⁵ Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2019) benefit-cost analyses showing significant ROI for early intervention programs involving social workers.

⁶ Karoly, L. A. (2017). The economic returns to early childhood education. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 37-55. This research connects social work early intervention to improved education outcomes.

⁷ Waldfogel, J. (2009). Prevention and the child protection system. *The Future of Children*, 19(2), 195-210. This research demonstrates connections between social worker involvement and multiple positive community indicators including health, education, and crime reduction.

Scale of the challenge

As the Lead Agency for workforce planning for all social workers, the SWRB gathers data and provides evidence to better understand the issues, opportunities and challenges faced by the social worker workforce⁸.

This evidence has been supplemented by surveys to assess demand for social work services and the outputs from the Health Workforce Forecasting Model, developed by the Health New Zealand/Te Whatu Ora, Analytics and Forecasting team.⁹

From this evidence base, we have identified a social worker workforce sustainability crisis that no single government or sector agency can solve alone.

What do we know?

Workforce Demography

- Social work is a female dominated workforce at 85%. Only 15% of social workers are male
- One in four or 25% of practising social workers identify as Māori
- 12% of social workers identify as Pacific Peoples
- Most social workers are New Zealand trained and qualified at 86%, 11% of the workforce qualify overseas. 3% of the workforce have qualified by experience.

This means there are more Māori and Pacific peoples in the social worker workforce than many other 'caring' professions such as nursing and midwifery, meaning the social work profession is much more representative of communities being served, and the majority of the workforce has been trained onshore.

But we know we do not have enough social workers to meet demand, and we are struggling to keep those we have.

⁸ Work includes drawing insights from the annual suite of "Voices of the Profession" Surveys, including those from social work employers, social work educators and the social work profession itself, including "Spotlight Reports" hearing from social workers employed in Oranga Tamariki, health-based organisations, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and from social workers employed in Iwi-based/Kaupapa Māori organisations and within the Tertiary education sector.

⁹ Workforce forecasts are based on patterns which have been evident in the last three or five years, and on projecting these patterns into the future (the next ten years). The workforce supply forecasting model is based on data on individual professions. Each professions new entries, re-entries and exits are tracked based on annual changes in work history. Entry and exit rates are calculated for the group of practitioners in each age group: in the forecasting model they are moved between age groups as they age.

Workforce sustainability

- Current estimates show approximately 700 unfilled social worker vacancies nationally
- 16% of current social workers plan to leave the profession within five years
- The workforce is ageing with one in five social workers aged 60 or above
- Average recruitment time for social work positions is 3.5 months, with some vacancies remaining open for over a year.

Education and training

- Student enrolment in social work programs continues to decline
- There is almost 50% attrition rate from social work courses
- Approximately 460 students complete a prescribed social work qualification annually, but 18% of graduates do not enter the social work workforce immediately after graduation
- Financial hardship is a significant barrier for students completing the four-year social work degree
- Social work programmes are not funded at a comparable rate to those leading into other regulated professions and social work programmes are closing.

Future demand

- Conservative estimates indicate a need for over 11,000 social workers by 2033 or 142 additional full-time social workers annually over each of the next ten years
- There is growing demand for social work services due to population ageing, increasing health and social service needs, and changing models of care, with service delivery shifting increasingly into community settings.

This means that current student enrolment, graduation and recruitment rates are insufficient to meet projected demand. Based on the indicative attrition rates noted above and the additional shortfall between social work graduates and those entering the profession, it is estimated that 370 more students would need to enrol in social work programmes each year to supplement the current intake, whilst at the same time Tertiary Education

Key issues to tackle together

From this evidence and insights, we know what the key challenges are and what needs to be done to tackle these issues together: the picture is one of increasing workforce sustainability challenges across all elements of the workforce lifecycle, but particularly in **attraction and recruitment (pipeline) and retention**

- in recent years this 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
- the **declining student completion rates** coupled with the **numbers of social workers signalling they will be leaving the profession** in the next five years

points towards a net loss in numbers overall and therefore **challenges relating to retention** within the workforce.

Put simply we have a social worker workforce sustainability crisis that no one single agency can solve alone.

Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau, the Social Worker Workforce Strategy is the Government's first strategy designed to collectively address these challenges.

Framing for the Strategy - Workforce lifecycle

The Social Worker Workforce Strategy has been framed using the action focused Workforce Lifecycle approach.

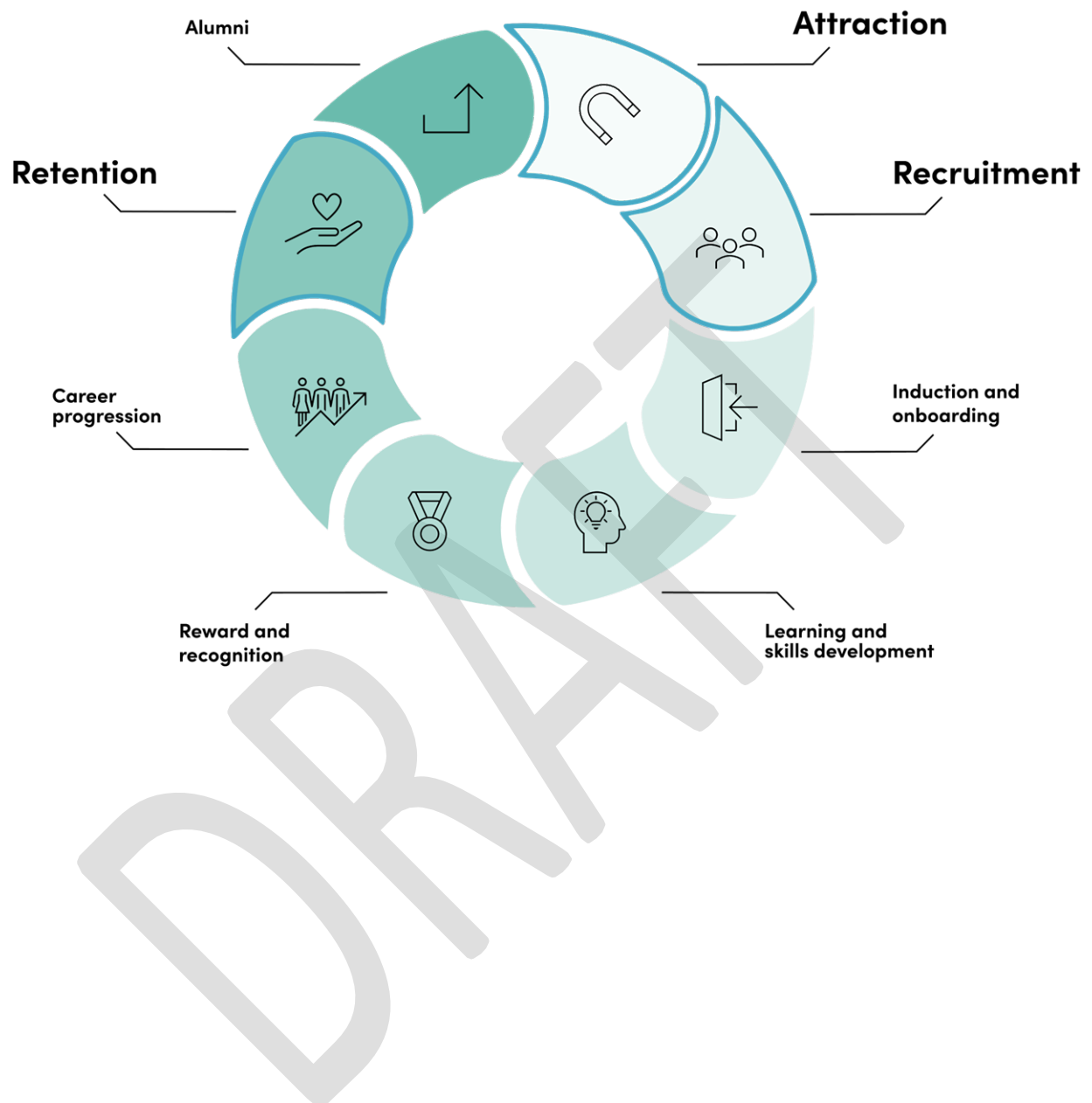
The Workforce Lifecycle explores the employee journey from attraction and recruitment to induction and onboarding, learning and skills development, retention through to eventual alumni and/or separation. The approach then focusses on the actions required at a system level to address the challenges the workforce is facing in each component on that journey.

Evidence tells us that there is work to do across all components of the Workforce Lifecycle, but as a matter of priority for this inaugural Strategy and Action Plan, we are focusing on two key areas:

- **attraction and recruitment** (which are key to increasing the supply of social workers into the professional pipeline)
- **retention** activities, to ensure that once we have social workers within the workforce, we do not lose them.

The diagram below shows all components of the Workforce Lifecycle, but places particular emphasis on workforce planning related to Attraction and Recruitment, and Retention activities at the system level.

Workforce lifecycle components and key areas of focus



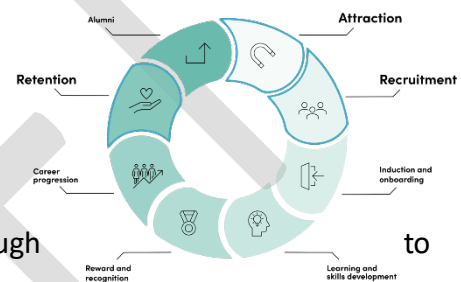
Key action areas

This *Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau*, the Social Worker Workforce Strategy focuses on those actions that responsible agencies will deliver to achieve a sustainable social worker workforce that is competent and safe and culturally responsive. This first Strategy aims to capture actions from across the system.

We have described those actions under each of the eight Workforce Lifecycle components including: attraction, recruitment, induction & onboarding, learning & skills development, reward & recognition, career progression, retention and alumni, but with a particular focus on actions to address known attraction and recruitment (Pipeline) and retention challenges

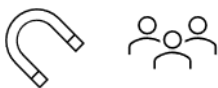
Key areas of focus

There are key actions to be considered across all components of the Workforce Lifecycle from attraction and recruitment to learning and skills development through retention and alumni activities.



Given the nature of the challenges facing the social worker workforce the Action Plan focuses on attracting and recruiting more social workers into the social work profession (the social worker pipeline) and on retaining the social workers we have.

It is noted that individual employers will retain responsibility for workforce development activities relating to their own social worker workforce, with the government's focus for this initial cross system Strategy and Action Plan being on more strategic systemic workforce planning activities relating to attraction and recruitment, and retention. (See separate Action Plan document that lists key actions for individual agencies.)



Attraction and recruitment (Pipeline)

- 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

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

Additional areas to address



Induction & onboarding

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



Learning & skills development

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



Reward & recognition

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



Career progression

- Creating clear career pathways
- Supporting leadership development.



Alumni/Separation

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

How this strategy fits with other related strategies

Social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand work across a range of sectors, in diverse settings, locations and for a wide variety of employers. As a result, there are multiple strategies and action plans in place across government relating to the social worker workforce. However, this strategy and action plan will be the first to specifically consider this workforce as a whole, across multiple parts of the system which will support a more joined-up way of working to address sustainability challenges.

The aim is to have a coordinated approach, agreed priorities, to reduce gaps and any overlaps in work across agencies.

Whilst not realistic to assume that the Government's first cross-system Social Worker Workforce Strategy will be able fully alleviate these issues, over time we expect to see more alignment of priorities, joined up planning and approaches to addressing the sustainability of this vital workforce.

We have identified the key plans, strategies and connections that will support the actions included in the partner Action Plan for this strategy. They include:

- [Government's Employment Action Plan](#) which sets out how people facing different challenges will be supported to contribute to the economy and improve labour market outcomes. It is designed to ensure that the welfare, employment, education and immigration systems are all working together to give New Zealanders the skills they need to find jobs and respond to the workforce needs of industries and communities. The plan contains 12 actions across the Social Development and Employment, Immigration, Education, Tertiary Education and Skills, and Regional Development portfolios.
- [Te Mahere Whai Mahi Māori \(Māori Employment Action Plan\)](#) which focuses on improving employment outcomes for Māori workers and is relevant for growing the Māori social work workforce, emphasises the importance of culturally appropriate training pathways, growing Māori participation in professional roles including social work and supports development of kaupapa Māori social services requiring Māori social workers.
- [Pacific Employment Action Plan](#) which similarly focuses on Pacific workforce development and could help inform strategies for growing the numbers of Pacific social workers.
- [Ministry of Health, Manatu Hauora's Health Workforce Strategic Plan](#) designed to

ensure a health workforce to meet the future needs of people and whānau, with a focus on building a sustainable health workforce.

- [Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora Health Workforce Plan](#) designed to respond to the Strategic Plan and to relieve current workforce pressures and meet future challenges.
- [Mental Health and Addiction Workforce Plan 2024](#) which has significant workforce implications, particularly around growing and developing the mental health workforce including social workers.
- [The Tertiary Education Strategy](#), as it guides education and training provision, funding, promotes flexible learning pathways and focuses on improving success rates for Māori and Pacific learners in social work programs.

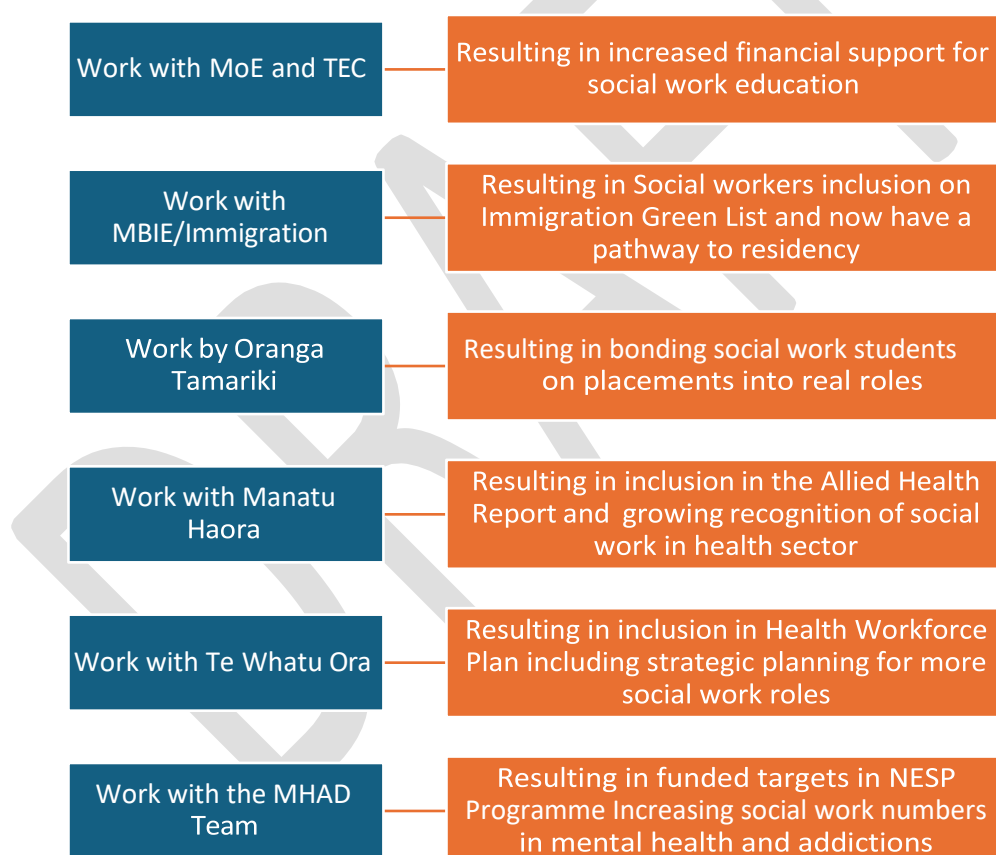
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Work to date

Significant work has already been undertaken on our behalf by the SWRB as the Government's Lead Agency for workforce planning for all social workers. The SWRB's role has focused on building workforce knowledge, developing robust evidence and developing relationships, to better understand workforce challenges. This work will continue to provide the foundation for this Strategy and Action Plan.

Current activity with individual agencies covering the following areas is included in the first year of the Action Plan and will continue to be reported against, as Agency actions for outyears are established.

Work has included:



Building from this foundation, we are now shifting up a gear 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 skilled and competent social workers in the right place, to deliver high quality social work services to New Zealanders who need them most.

Implementing the strategy

Who will deliver this strategy

Our key stakeholders

Government agencies cannot deliver this strategy alone - All key stakeholders have a role in implementation.

In the delivery, monitoring and reporting against this Strategy and partner Action Plan, the SWRB will be working with key stakeholders, as well as having targeted conversations with sector leaders and experts. We are proposing that this will be facilitated by an External Advisory Group which the SWRB is currently establishing.

Membership of the External Advisory Group will be drawn from across the system potentially including:

Professional Membership Bodies

Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW)

Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association (TWSWA)

Government employers

Oranga Tamariki/ Ministry for Children who as a government agency is the single biggest employer of social workers with over a fifth of the workforce (22%).

Health New Zealand/Te Whatu Ora and other funded health delivery organisations are responsible for the delivery of health services and employ 21% of the social worker workforce making a significant contribution to the delivery of allied health and mental health services in hospitals, community-based and primary care settings.

Peak Bodies

Social Service Providers (SSPA) - Te Pai Ora o Aotearoa, with a membership including many NGOs employing social workers, where we know 29% of the social worker workforce is employed.

New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCSS)

Workforce Development Council - Toitū te Waiora (Community, Health, Education, and Social Services Workforce Development Council) has a key role exploring staircasing options into social work programmes at the sub-degree level.

Iwi social service employers

Iwi Social Services (members tbc)

Policy advisors

Ministry for Social Development which is the government agency with a stewardship role (along with SWRB) as administrator and lead policy agency for the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 (SWR Act 2003).

Manatū Hauora/Ministry of Health which is the system steward and lead policy agency for health.

Ministry of Education is the agency responsible for setting education policy including that for social work degree programme providers and the settings for possible education feeder pathways.

We will work with other groups as well

Tertiary Education Commission as the primary pathway into the social worker workforce is via qualification attainment, the social worker registration system is closely linked to the training and education systems. The Ministry of Education and Tertiary Education Commission therefore play key roles in ensuring a sustainable pipeline of social work students are and continue to enter the social worker workforce via qualification attainment.

NZQA works alongside occupational regulators in the verification of qualifications, ongoing quality assurance and monitoring.

Council for social work educators Aotearoa New Zealand (CSWEANZ) Collective of social work education provider representatives who deliver SWRB prescribed social work qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand.

How will we do it

The SWRB will continue to work with agencies and key stakeholders to further develop and deliver on the actions underway.

The partner Action Plan to this Strategy will continue to evolve over time. Each action in the Plan is the responsibility of one or more Agency or Stakeholder to deliver.

Our focus

The focus of this ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau - 2025-2028***, the Social Worker Workforce Strategy is on the creation of sustainable pathways into the social worker workforce,

- to attract and recruit more social work students and those who qualified overseas into the social work pipeline in Aotearoa New Zealand and
- to encourage more workers to remain in the profession and more social work students to remain within their social work programmes (retention) and subsequently enter the profession.

Action plan 2025-2028

The SWRB has developed a partner Action Plan, in conjunction with other agencies, detailing who is responsible for delivering each action.

To maintain momentum work already underway in key areas will continue.

The Action Plan contains actions to achieve the “what needs to happen” statements and will contain who is responsible for achieving the actions, and by when.

Monitoring and governance

The Minister for Social Development and Employment will oversee the delivery of the strategy, ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau - 2025 - 2028***.

The Child and Youth Ministers are the Ministerial Steering Group. These Ministers portfolios have a strong alignment with the work in the Action Plan, and they will ensure through their officials progress of the work.

An Officials Steering Group supports the Ministers Group, working with the SWRB and through the Ministry for Social Development to track progress on the implementation of the Action Plan, identify and mitigate risks, and adjust priorities.

In addition, SWRB will be working with key stakeholders, and alongside sector leaders and experts. This will be facilitated by an External Advisory Group which the SWRB is establishing to inform and support the development and delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan.

Reporting

The SWRB will be responsible for refreshing this Strategy and the partner Action Plan on behalf of the Minister for Social Development and Employment.

In accordance with its mandate as the Lead Agency for workforce planning, the SWRB will publish this Strategy, the Action Plan, monitoring and up to five yearly, update the ***Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau - 2025 - 2028***, the Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan 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

FY 2025-2026

Strategy and Action
Plan implementation
begins

FY 2026-2027

Action Plan Year 1 Report Published

FY 2026-2027

Action Plan Report Year 2
developed

FY 2027-2028

Action Plan Year 2 Report Published

FY 2027-2028

Action Plan Report Year 3
developed

FY 2030 -2031

Five-year review of *Sustainable Social Work Pathways: Tauwhiro Ararau - 2025 - 2030*,
Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan

Terms used in this strategy

In the context of this strategy the following terms are used:

Social work is a practice-based profession that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Social work practise is underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Social Worker is a protected title under the Social Workers Registration Act 2003. This means that only social workers who are registered by the SWRB can use the title “social worker” and practise within the General Scope of Social Work Practise.

Tauwhiro which means social worker in te reo Māori was a term gifted to the SWRB in 2020 during the development of the SWRB organisational whakataukī. The whakataukī was developed through the support of Danny Makamaka of Ngāi Tūhoe, a prominent teacher and kaumātua of Te Wānanga O Aotearoa. During the wānanga, Pā Danny also posed the following question, what does the word Tauwhiro mean? Some of the students described Tauwhiro as, ‘social worker/social work’. Pā Danny shared additional knowledge and wisdom into the space replying with, ‘kia tau ai te mahi ā Whiro,’ to settle the presence of Whiro. Tau is to settle, to subside, Whiro is the personification of illness and afflictions.

Competent refers to a social worker who can demonstrate applied knowledge, skills and values in their social work practice that meets the SWRB Ten Core Competence Standards.

Safe which in this context refers to public safety and the SWRB protecting the safety of the public by ensuring that social workers are safe to practise and accountable for their practise. Regulatory tools such as registration, certification and setting standards in education are used to ensure competence and hold social workers to account through disciplinary processes. The Code of Conduct supports social workers to understand their professional obligations within a regulated profession. Social workers are required to demonstrate *safe practice* by adherence to the expectations set out in the SWRB Code of Conduct and the ANZASW Code of Ethics.

Culturally Responsive practice considers that each person has their own culture, values and beliefs that must be acknowledged and supported. Social workers are required to respect the status of Māori as tangata whenua and be respectful to the cultural needs values, belief systems and world views of their clients.

A Sustainable Workforce is where there are enough workers, with the right skills, knowledge and competencies, deployed in the right place, at the right time, and at the right cost.

References

References for the SWRB's draft Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan

SWRB Annual Social Worker Workforce report 2024 (unpublished, due for launch December 6, 2024)

SWRB Annual Social Worker Workforce report 2023 (2024)

SWRB Workforce Survey 2023 – Health Spotlight (2024)

SWRB Workforce Survey 2023 – Oranga Tamariki Spotlight (2024)

SWRB Workforce Survey 2023 – NGO Spotlight (2024)

SWRB Workforce Survey Report 2022 (2023)

Demand for Social Work Services Report (2022)

<https://swrb.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-publications/publications/#workforce-surveys>

SWRB Annual Social Work Education report 2023 (unpublished, due for launch December 6, 2024)

SWRB 2022 Annual Social Work Education Report (2023)

SWRB 2021 Annual Education Providers Report (2022)

<https://swrb.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-publications/publications/#education-reports>

SWRB Emerging Findings from the Social Worker Employer Survey 2024 (final draft, unpublished)

SWRB Job Vacancy count 2021 (unpublished)

SWRB Social Worker-like Kaimahi Report (2024)

<https://swrb.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-publications/publications/#other-publications>

SWRB Annual Report 2023-2024

SWRB Annual Report 2022-2023

SWRB Annual Report 2021-2022

<https://swrb.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-publications/publications/#Annual-Reports>