



**Social Workers
Registration Board**
Kāhui Whakamana Tauwhiro

RETURN TO PRACTICE (AFTER A BREAK IN PRACTICE)

POLICY

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Summary

Experienced social workers play an important role in the social work workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand. This includes those returning to practice after an absence, bringing valuable skills, expertise and knowledge back into the workforce.

This Policy establishes a framework for social workers returning to practice. It sets out the requirements for re-applying for a Practising Certificate while considering their previous experience and skills. It supports them in maintaining competency and safe practice, enabling the delivery of high-quality and culturally responsive social work services in their communities.

The term, 'applicant/s', is used intermittently to refer to social worker/s undergoing this process.

Relevant legislation and related policies:

- Social Workers Registration Act 2003 (the Act) (specifically sections 8A to 8B, and sections 30 to 33 of the Act)
- Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) Fitness to Practise Policy
- SWRB Supervision Expectations for Registered Social Workers – Policy Statement
- SWRB Ten Core Competence Standards.

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Introduction

1. This Policy sets out the high-level framework and requirements for a registered social worker seeking to return to social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, after a break in practice. It sets out the requirements for them to re-apply for their Practising Certificate.
2. To practise as a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand, a person must be registered as a social worker, have a current Practising Certificate, and practise only within the terms of their individual scope of practice.
3. If they are not practising social work within Aotearoa New Zealand, a social worker can choose not to renew their Practising Certificate during their time away from practice. Their registration is still maintained on the Register. When they seek to return to practise in Aotearoa New Zealand, they are required to re-apply for a Practising Certificate.
4. The process to apply for a Practising Certificate depends on how long it has been since the social worker last held a Practising Certificate – the [three-year threshold](#) ([paragraph 13](#)):
 - i. If it has been less than three years since the social worker last held a Practising Certificate, they can renew their Practising Certificate through the online portal - [MYSWRB](#), with minimum requirements, provided that no issues have been raised regarding their fitness to practise (including their physical or mental health), competence to practise, or conduct.
 - ii. If it has been more than three years since the social worker last held a Practising Certificate, the Board will consider the social worker's competence to practise under the Social Workers Registration Act (the Act)¹.

If the Board determines that the social worker is not competent to practise without conditions, it may :

 - impose conditions on the social worker's practising certificate ([section 33 of the Act](#)²).
 - impose conditions which must be met before the person can receive a practising certificate, or
 - refuse to issue a practising certificate.

Where conditions or refusal are proposed, the social worker will be given an opportunity to make written submissions and be heard by the Board before the decision is made final.
5. Every decision is made on a case-by-case basis by the Board, using the principles of good regulatory practice. For applicants who last held a Practising Certificate beyond the three-year threshold, decisions are also made according to [specific factors](#) that may impact or mitigate a social worker's competence and fitness to practise social work. Refer to [paragraph 15](#).

¹ [Sections 30\(1\)\(a\)\(iv\) and 30\(1\)\(b\)\(ii\)](#) of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 (the Act).

² Section 33 of the Act - Decisions of Board as to practising certificates. Please refer to this link - <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2003/0017/latest/whole.html#DLM190202>

Scope

6. This Policy applies to social workers who are seeking to re-apply for a Practising Certificate after a break from practising in Aotearoa New Zealand, including those who have been living overseas. The term, applicant/s, is used to refer to social worker/s undergoing this process.
7. This Policy does not apply to:
 - i. social workers who have never held a Practising Certificate
 - ii. social workers who have been living outside of Aotearoa New Zealand but who have continued to hold a Practising Certificate as they work remotely with New Zealand whānau
 - iii. persons whose registrations were cancelled³ under certain circumstances, and who now want to reinstate their registrations. These individuals must apply for reinstatement of their registration⁴ before applying for a Practising Certificate. This may include situations where there may be a time delay between graduation and registration.

Purpose

8. This Policy outlines the principles and requirements for social workers re-applying for their Practising Certificate after a break in practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is designed to support them in a smooth and safe transition back into the profession.
9. By following this Policy, the Board ensures it meets its legislative responsibility to protect public safety and uphold the professionalism of social workers.
10. This Policy also ensures the Board's process and decision-making adhere to the SWRB Regulatory Strategy 2024-2028, namely adhering to:
 - i. principles of good regulation: transparency, fairness, and accountability
 - ii. regulatory good practice: intelligence-led, responsive, and public safety focused.

Declaration of competence and fitness to practise as a social worker

11. All applicants must confirm that they are competent and fit to practise when they apply to renew their Practising Certificate. In brief, this involves declaring that they do not have any

³ Section 129(3) of the Act refers to social workers who, in writing, inform the Registrar that they wish to have their registration cancelled.

Section 129(4) of the Act refers to social workers who do not reply to the Board within six months, regarding their intention to practise as social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand as part of the revision of the Social Workers Register.

⁴ Section 130 of the Act – Restoration of entries. Please refer to this link -

<https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2003/0017/latest/whole.html#DLM190627>

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issues about their competence, conduct, physical or mental health since their time away from practice. This declaration is required regardless of how long they have been out of practice.

12. The Board may decide that further assessment is needed to make sure an applicant is competent and fit to practise in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Three-year threshold: Duration without a Practising Certificate

13. The Board delineates a different application process for applicants who have not held a Practising Certificate for three years or longer before re-applying for one. The three-year threshold applies to all applicants, including those who have practised overseas during their time away in Aotearoa New Zealand (refer to [paragraphs 35 to 36](#)).
 - i. If an applicant has not held a Practising Certificate for **less than** three years immediately before the application date, they can **usually** renew it with minimum requirements ([paragraphs 18 to 20](#)) — provided no issues have been raised concerning their competence, conduct, physical or mental health.
 - ii. If it has been **more than** three years, the Board will assess whether the applicant is competent to practice before approving the renewal of their Practising Certificate ([paragraphs 21 to 22](#)). They are required to provide supporting evidence during the application process ([paragraphs 31 to 34](#)).

Guiding principles

14. Each application for return to practise is assessed on a case-by-case basis, which is supported by principles of good regulation and regulatory good practice (Table 1).
15. For applicants who last held a Practising Certificate beyond the three-year threshold, decisions are also based on factors that may impact or mitigate their competency and fitness to practise social work. They must provide additional evidence relevant to these decision factors to support their application ([paragraphs 31 to 34](#)).

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Table 1: Guiding principles and decision factors for return to practice

Principles of good regulation

Transparency, Fairness, Accountability

Regulatory good practice

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Intelligence-led | • Decisions are guided by relevant information and data, ensuring they are evidence-based and robust. |
| Responsive | • A fair, evidence-based, and proportionate approach is taken in every decision, ensuring consistency for every case and appropriate outcomes are applied at the right time. |
| Public safety focused | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decision outcomes are designed to support social workers' safe and smooth transition back into their profession while upholding public trust and safety.• Every social worker returning to practice is competent and fit to practise in Aotearoa New Zealand, including competency to work with tangata whenua and different ethnic communities. |

Factors that may impact competence and fitness to practise as a social worker

- The length of time away from social work practice
- Little or no engagement in any activity with relevant transferrable skills
- Little or no involvement in professional development relevant to social work during their time away
- Any mental or physical conditions that may affect a social worker's ability to practise safely
- Any post-registration convictions
- Any professional disciplinary proceeding or investigation during their time away from social work practice, which could negatively impact their fitness to practise.

Factors that may mitigate the impact on competence and fitness to practise as a social worker

- Practising social work in an overseas country during their time away
- Evidence of transferrable skills in related fields or practices during time away from practice
- Evidence of activity that demonstrates the applicant has maintained knowledge and familiarity with contemporary research, for example, CPD and social work supervision, during their time away from social work.

Guidance for employers

16. Employers are responsible for exercising due diligence in evaluating candidates' suitability for a position and their professional conduct, including character checks and police vetting. Offers of employment for social work positions should be conditional on successful application for a Practising Certificate.

Outcomes

17. The Decision Matrix in Figure 1 sets out the possible application outcomes.

Approval for applicants without a Practising Certificate within the three-year threshold

18. Applicants for return to practice within the [three-year threshold](#) can renew their Practising Certificate directly through the online portal – [MySWRB](#) (refer to [paragraph 13](#)). The renewal process also involves a declaration of competence and fitness to practise as a social worker, whereby further assessment may be required to ensure their competency and fitness to practise in Aotearoa New Zealand.
19. There are two possible outcomes based on their time away from practice.
- i. **Approval**
This is likely to be the outcome for applicants who have been away from practice for less than eighteen months. The Registrar approves the application for a Practising Certificate without any additional conditions.
 - ii. **Approval – evidence of participation in social work professional supervision and CPD**
This is likely to be the outcome for applicants who have been away from practice for more than eighteen months and less than three years. The Registrar approves the application for a Practising Certificate.
The Registrar will make a note that at the social worker's next application for a practising certificate, they will be asked to provide evidence of complying with their CPD and professional supervision obligations. The Registrar will advise the social worker of this at the time they issue the practising certificate.
20. The Registrar retains the power to refer any application to the Board if they suspect, on reasonable grounds, that the applicant has at any time failed to maintain a reasonable standard of professional competence or is not a fit to practice as a social worker.

Outcomes for applicants without a Practising Certificate beyond the three-year threshold

21. In the case of applicants who have not held a practising certificate for more than three years, the Board will determine the best outcome for these applicants upon reviewing their competency and fitness to practice based on the [decision factors](#) (and supporting evidence provided by them (paragraphs [31](#) to [34](#)). The possible outcomes are as follows:

i. **Approval without conditions**

The Board approves a practising certificate without conditions. This will only happen in exceptional circumstances where the Board is satisfied that the applicant's time away from practice raises no concerns about their competence to practise, such that it does not need to impose a condition that the social worker undertake professional supervision.

ii. **Approval with conditions – professional social work supervision**

The Board proposes to issue a Practising Certificate with a condition that the applicant undertake professional supervision at least monthly for six or twelve months, the duration of which is determined by the Board. The social worker must provide a supervision plan, and their supervisor is required to submit written reports at the time of the social worker's next Practising Certificate renewal ([paragraphs 24 to 26](#)). The Board may propose to impose additional conditions to support the applicant's competency and fitness to practise upon their return to social work. It is at the discretion of the Board what conditions it proposes, and the conditions it imposes will be decided on a case-by-case basis.

iii. **Initial decline with conditions**

The Board proposes to decline the application until a condition is completed, for example, undertaking a specific course of training.

iv. **Decline**

The Board proposes to decline the application for a Practising Certificate.

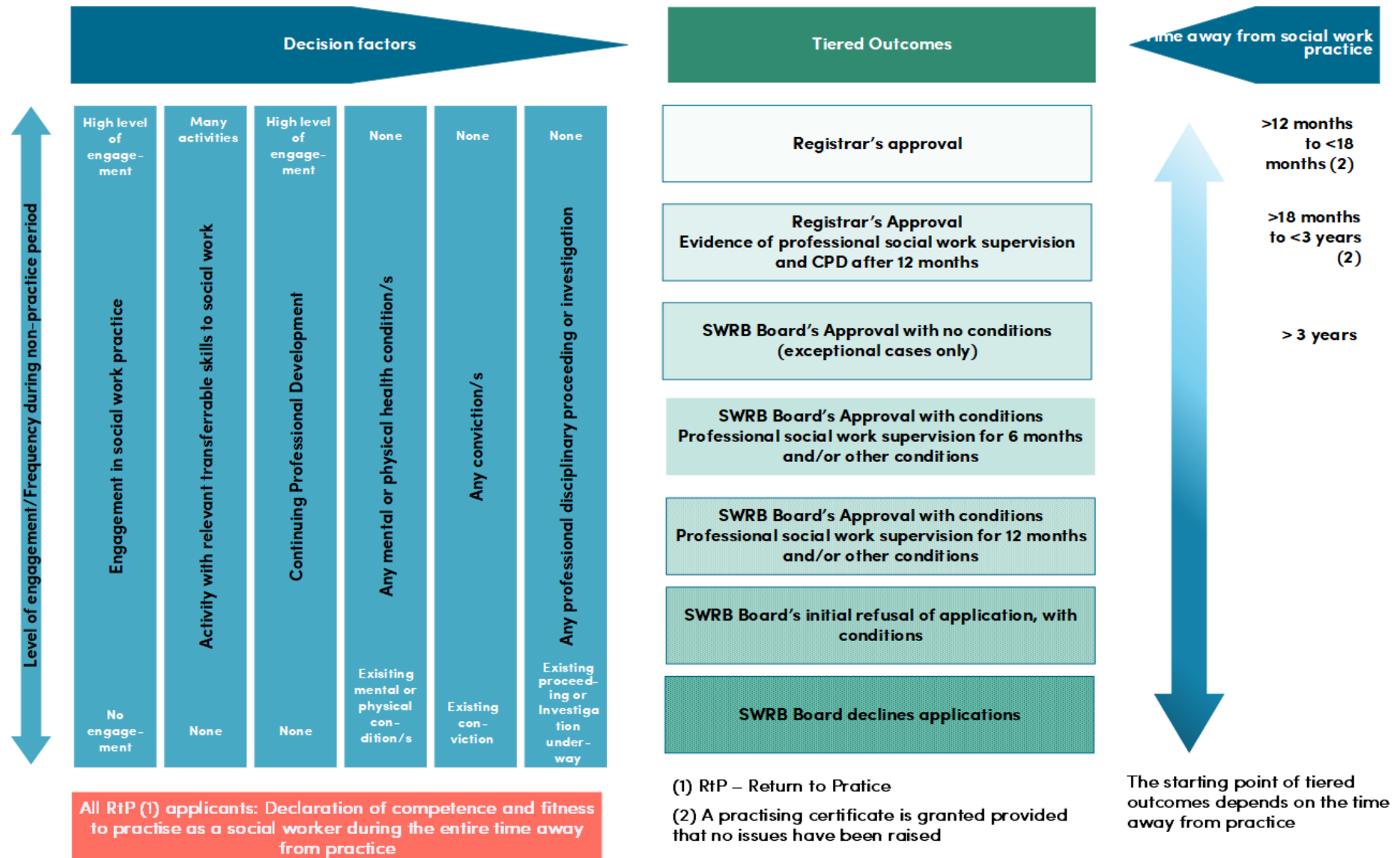
22. Any decision to impose conditions or to refuse to issue a practising certificate is provisional, and the applicant will be provided with an opportunity to make written submissions or be heard before the decision is finalised (as set out in more detail below).

Notification of decision

23. The Board will follow a natural justice process according to [section 32 of the Act](#). When the Board proposes to decline an application or impose conditions on a Practising Certificate, the Board will advise the applicant of its proposal and the reasons for that proposal. The applicant will be given an opportunity to comment and be heard. The Board will consider the applicant's comments before making a final decision.

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Figure 1. Decision Matrix – Return to Practice After a Break in Practice



Professional social work supervision

24. This arrangement includes professional supervision with a registered social worker at least monthly for six or twelve months. Professional social work supervision for returnees will focus on working through the Core Competence Standards and the Code of Conduct. Supervision should commence once the Practising Certificate is issued.
25. The social worker must provide the following evidence to the Board at the time of their next Practising Certificate renewal:
- i. A supervision contract
 - ii. A supervision plan
 - iii. Evidence of completing twenty hours of CPD activities
26. The Board requires the nominated supervisor to provide brief reports at the time of the social worker's next Practising Certificate renewal.

Competence Review and Assessment

27. If the applicant is returning to practice after three years, the Board (or its delegate) will review their competence, and they may be required to undertake a formal competence assessment. It is open to the Board to decide not to require a formal assessment if it is satisfied it has no reason to believe the applicant's competence may be unsatisfactory.
28. Applicants will be given an opportunity to comment on their own competence or be heard by the Board (or the relevant delegated decision maker).
29. After considering an applicant's competence under sections 38 of the Act through the review process, the Board may either issue the practising certificate, propose to issue the practising certificate with conditions, or require a formal assessment.
30. The Board reserves the right to require a social worker to undertake a competence assessment at their own cost as a prerequisite for issuing a practising certificate, with the granting of the certificate dependent on the outcome of the assessment.

Supporting evidence relevant to an applicant's competency

31. This section only applies to applicants without a Practising Certificate beyond the [three-year threshold \(refer to paragraph 13\)](#). In this case, they must provide the following documents to the Board:
- i. A cover letter detailing reasons for their period of non-practice, including a summary of:

- reasons for their time away from practice
 - any relevant activities outside of the paid work environment
 - any transferrable skills from a paid role in related fields or practices, and
 - their intended areas of practice after obtaining a Practising Certificate.
- ii. Evidence of any professional development undertaken during their time away from social work, such as courses, workshops, or other activities to maintain or enhance professional competencies within the field.
 - iii. An updated Curriculum Vitae detailing their postgraduate professional social work experience and any social work-related activities during the non-practice period.

Supporting evidence to assess an applicant's fitness to practise

32. As mentioned in [paragraphs 11-12](#), all applicants must confirm that they are competent and fit to practice when they apply to renew their Practising Certificate. This declaration is required regardless of how long they have been out of practice.
33. For applicants without a Practising Certificate beyond the [three-year decision threshold \(paragraph 13\)](#), the Board will advise an applicant to provide additional information, on a case-by-case basis, which may include, but not be limited to, the following, as per the SWRB Fit & Proper Policy:
- i. a professional reference attesting to their professional conduct and work conduct from their previous employer, or
 - ii. a character reference from a person of high standing in the community,
 - iii. a written advice from a medical practitioner or psychologist
 - iv. New Zealand police vet.
34. The Board reserves the right to request additional information regarding matters arising from the application. This may include further information to assess the social worker's fitness to practise.

Applicants who want to return to practice after being away overseas, but maintain their registration with the Board

35. The [guiding principles \(paragraphs 14 to 15\)](#) and the possible outcomes ([paragraphs 18 to 22](#)) also apply to applicants re-applying for a Practising Certificate after a period overseas of three years or more, and maintaining their registration with the Board. Approved applications for these social workers are more likely to be subject to a condition being imposed requiring professional social work supervision.

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36. In addition to the supporting evidence relevant to [competence](#) and [fitness to practise](#) as social workers (paragraphs [31](#) to [34](#)), they must also provide the following evidence:
- i. An overseas police check
 - ii. Certificate of Good Standing (COGS) issued by the registration authority in which they registered. It must be issued within three months of the intended return date to New Zealand.

Definitions/Glossary of abbreviations

The following is a glossary of definitions and abbreviations used in this Policy.

Applicant/s	In this Policy, applicant/s refer to social workers re-applying for their Practising Certificate after a break in practice, i.e. not having a current Practising Certificate while remaining registered with the SWRB
The Board	Refers to the secretariat and the governing body of the Social Workers Registration Board
Competence	The demonstrated application of professional knowledge, skills, and values in practice
Condition(s)	Is the specific requirement or restriction that can be placed on a social worker's individual scope of practice for them to continue to practise social work
Core Competencies	The SWRB Core Competence Standards set the minimum recognised standards of practice required of registered social workers of the social work profession in Aotearoa New Zealand and should be read alongside the SWRB Code of Conduct and the ANZASW Code of Ethics
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
Direction	A written decision made by the Board
Individual scope of practice	Refers to the specific services and activities that a particular social worker can carry out, which may include any conditions that apply to them. While there is currently one General Scope of Social Work Practice for all social workers, each social worker has their customised version based on their specific situation and circumstances
Fit/Fitness to practise	Having the appropriate skills, knowledge, character, and health to practise social work safely according to the fit and proper assessment criteria in the SWRB Fit and Proper Policy
Social work practice	Social work practice refers to any role, whether remunerated or not, that assesses, supports, improves, or protects the well-being of individuals, families, groups, or communities. It involves applying social work skills and knowledge and uses a range of indigenous and social work theories, methods, and techniques to enhance people's well-being, as outlined in the SWRB General Scope of Social Work Practice
Practising Certificate (PC)	A document issued by the Board that shows a registered person can legally practise as a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand for the specified period.
Registration	Means the entry in the Register of Social Workers of the information in respect of a person. To practise social work in Aotearoa New Zealand, a

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	person is required to register and hold a current Practising Certificate with the Social Workers Registration Board
Registrar	Is the official who has the responsibility for maintaining the Register of Social Workers, issuing Practising Certificates and ensuring social workers meet their regulatory obligations
Register	The list of records of registered social workers that the Board keeps. It includes information in respect of each registrant outlined in section 123 of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003
Scope(s) of Practice	Means the specific types of social work services and activities that social workers can carry out, according to their knowledge, skills and experience. The Social Workers Registration Board currently has one General Scope of Social Work Practice . Refer also to the individual's scope of practice mentioned above
Social worker	A person who is registered under the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 as a social worker
Social Workers Registration Board (abbreviated as 'the Board' hereafter)	Kāhui Whakamana Tauwhiro/Social Workers Registration Board is a Crown agent with the regulatory responsibility for the registration of social workers. It has a Cabinet-designated role in workforce planning and operates under the oversight of the Ministry of Social Development to meet Government expectations.
Supervision	Is a professional, relational process between a supervisor and a supervisee, which enables reflective critical analysis and underpins quality social work services, as outlined in the SWRB Supervision Expectations . Social workers also have the responsibility to undertake supervision as part of maintaining their registration.
The SWRB Board	The governing body of the Social Workers Registration Board, according to the Crown Entities Act 2004. It has the decision-making powers set out in the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 unless delegated, for example, to the Chief Executive, Registrar, or a Committee.