The Social Work Alliance

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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Part 1:
Our position

Te amorangi ki mua, te hapai ō ki muri
The leader doesn't advance forward without the support of those behind them

The Social Work Alliance calls for a National Social Work Workforce Planning and Development Strategy, which provides a unified and consistent vision for achieving a sustainable social work workforce. This includes ensuring there are enough social workers, with the necessary skills and abilities to meet the needs of Aotearoa New Zealand's tamariki, rangatahi, whānau and communities.

The Alliance acknowledges the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), as the lead agency for social worker workforce planning and responsible for developing a Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan[1].

This paper asserts a collective position and call to action around several key strategic priorities which must be met to achieve a sustainable social worker workforce for Aotearoa New Zealand. Our goal, as the Social Work Alliance, is to realise tūhonohono[2], fostering unity and collaboration within our profession. By raising these concerns, we aim to provide constructive, supportive, and aligned expertise as leaders within our social work profession but recognising that leadership also demands an obligation to accurately represent those who are supporting from behind, as the whakatauki states.

Our aspirations for social work workforce planning and development are positioned within our obligations and responsibilities to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, decolonisation, and other equity factors. Māori-led workforce development that embeds tino rangatiratanga[3], cultural authority and Māori-led solutions will be imperative to progress delivery actions from a tangata whenua, tangata moana (Pacific Peoples/Pasifika) and tangata Tiriti perspective, with parallel streams potentially running simultaneously.

While the generic term Māori is often used throughout this kaupapa kōrero, this is not to undermine or reduce the significance of the terms tangata whenua and indigenous, but simply as a form of expression for this kaupapa. We recognise that language is instrumental in conveying meaning and intent, but it is also a vehicle by which perception can be changed.

We believe that through collective effort and strategic planning, we can navigate a united pathway that allows us to address the real pressures and challenges that our workforce faces. In taking forward our collective contributions, we recognise the need for this to be done in a way that strengthens relationships with Iwi, Hapū, Māori, and community partners, and prioritises their perspectives and aspirations. Attaining equitable workforce outcomes is central to the change the Alliance wishes to realise and recognises a wide-ranging strategy will be required to deliver on this.

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[1] New Zealand Government. (2020). *Report of the Cabinet Social Wellbeing Committee: Period Ended 31 July 2020. SWC-20-MIN-0111* https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/information-releases/workforce-planning-for-all-social-workers/cab-20-min-0359-minute.pdf

[2] **Tūhonohono** – to join (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

[3] **Tino rangatiratanga** - self-determination, sovereignty, autonomy, self-government, domination, rule, control, power. (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

It is our hope that soon we will see tangible improvements that will stabilise and strengthen our profession, ensuring that social workers can continue to provide essential services to our communities.

Who is the Social Work Alliance?

The Alliance was originally convened by the SWRB in 2013 with the purpose of forming a collaboration between all the major social work services, tertiary education providers, the professional bodies Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers and Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association, DHBs, SSPA (Social Service Providers), Oranga Tamariki, and the PSA Union. The Alliance played a key contributing role to the SWRB's establishment of mandatory registration.

The Social Work Alliance now functions as a coalition of social work system leaders from across Aotearoa New Zealand, who collaboratively provide strategic advice and leadership on behalf of the social work profession. Our kaupapa is to bring together the experiences mōhiotanga[4] and mātauranga[5] of tangata whenua, tangata moana and broader social work kaimahi through the collective leadership rōpū[6], to achieve a diverse, inclusive, and thriving social work profession for the oranga and rangatiratanga of whānau, tamariki and hāpori. The tikanga of the Alliance is based on the concepts of Tūhonohono, Tiakitanga[7] and Rangatiratanga. This position paper is an example of the Alliance enacting that role and laying the wero for decision-makers and social workers alike who can collectively address workforce sustainability.

Social work workforce context

Social workers are essential frontline professionals who work with some of Aotearoa New Zealand's most vulnerable individuals, families, whānau, and communities. All social workers practice under a general scope, irrespective of what sector or field they may practice in, while navigating their own ancestral origins.

Social work is in a unique position as a regulated profession within a largely unregulated social services sector[8]. Social workers are employed across the full range of services. There are around 600 NGOs and around 80 public sector agencies that employ social workers. There are currently 12,449 registered social workers, but only 9,135 hold a practicing certificate. Around 29% of social workers work for non-government organisations, 26% work for Te Whatu Ora/Health New Zealand, 22% work for Oranga Tamariki, 8% work in Kaupapa Māori/Iwi-based organisations, and 1% work in Pacific organisations. Of note, around 2% work in tertiary education, training our future social workers.

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[4] **Mōhiotanga** - knowledge, knowing, understanding, comprehension, intelligence, awareness, insight, perception (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

[5] **Mātauranga** - knowledge, wisdom, understanding, skill. (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

[6] **Rōpū** - group, party of people, company, gang, association, entourage, committee, organisation, category. (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

[7] **Tiakitanga -** guardianship, caring of, protection, upkeep. (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

[8] SWRB (2023). *Briefing to the Incoming Minister of Social Development and Employment.* https://swrb.govt.nz/download/swrb-briefing-for-incoming-minister-november-2023/?tmstv=1746418572

Various societal factors have increased the demand for social workers, resulting in a significant social worker shortage nationally. There is a persistent mismatch between the supply of social workers in the workforce and the increasing demand. The SWRB has indicated that approximately 700 social workers are needed to address current workforce shortages (albeit this number is very indicative). Additionally, attrition rates sit at approximately 217 per year, with predictions suggesting that more social workers will leave the profession than register with the SWRB within the next five years[9]. Using these insights, the total workforce demand can be forecasted as approximately 917 more social workers per year. Over 2023/2024, SWRB registered 744 social workers, a 14% increase from the previous year[10], however, on average, only 395 social workers qualify and join the workforce each year[11], suggesting a significant mismatch between local training supply and forecasted demand.

Given this context there is a significant risk posed to the sustainability of health and social services organisations, with the likelihood of organisations experiencing "failure demand" due to the mismatch between supply and demand and wider market failure through the reduced capacity to provide services. Unless the social work workforce crisis is meaningfully addressed, there remains the possibility of regulatory failure, with social services being unable to employ social workers. This could lead to further deprofessionalisation and a growing negative perception of the existing workforce. A concerted sector-wide effort to collectively address this problem is urgently required.

Strategic priorities for national social work workforce planning & development

The Alliance has identified 8 key strategic priorities which must be met to achieve a sustainable social work workforce for Aotearoa New Zealand.

These strategic priorities and associated delivery actions highlight the interconnectedness of the challenges and barriers that need to be removed, if the outcomes and their impacts are to be realised. Realising these priorities requires a collective response from across the whole system associated with the social work profession. They provide a reference point to advocate for and monitor progress across the sector.

In addressing the strategic priorities, we will know we have collectively made an impact for the social work workforce, when:

- the mana and professional standing of social work and social workers is recognised and realised. Social work is valued and viewed as an attractive profession and portrayed as such by the media and public.

[9] SWRB (2024). *Annual social worker workforce report 2024: A high-level overview of the social worker workforce in 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-worker-workforce-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[10] SWRB (2024). *SWRB Annual Report 2023-2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/swrb-annual-report-2023-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[11] SWRB. (2024). *Annual Social Work Education Report 2023*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-work-education-report-2023/?tmstv=1744591630

- we have a sustainable social work workforce, who have the capabilities, diversity and capacity required to be aligned, collaborative and responsive to meet demand across the sectors and country.
- we can contribute meaningfully at all levels, to address social conditions and indicators, which may lead to reduced demand for social workers.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGIC PRIORITY DELIVERY ACTIONS

1	Increase the supply of locally trained social workers	*1. Leverage understanding of students needs to enable fit-for-purpose responses.*
		2. Increase attraction of studying social work.
		3. Understand and reduce the financial barriers to studying social work.
		4. Explore wider supports that enable students to complete their study.
		5. Understand and grow the capacity of the education sector to support increasing enrolment.
2	Increase the number of overseas qualified social workers	*6. Promote attraction and recruitment of overseas qualified social workers.*
		7. Support overseas qualified social workers to be 'workplace ready'.
		8. Identify opportunities to streamline the overseas registration model to reduce costs.

3	Increase number of social workers with a practising certificate	*9. Understand the rationale for why some qualified social workers are choosing not to register.*
		10. Better understand the profiles of registered social workers without practising certificates.
		11. Develop an action plan to reduce barriers for (re)entering the workforce.
		12. Review the regulatory funding model to reduce the financial burden on social workers and employers.
4	Ensure a pathway exists for the recognition of prior learning and experience to lead to social work registration	*13. Establish alternative registration pathways, including a vocational educational pathway to replace s13.*
		14. Develop assessment systems for the recognition of prior learning.
		15. Explore skill standards and micro-credentials within programmes which may lead onto social work pathway.
		16. Explore work-based, vocational education learning programmes which could lead to social work registration.
5	Ensure equitable workforce outcomes for Māori and Pacific social workers	*17. Promote Māori and Pacific social workers in leadership.*
		18. Develop leadership programmes for Māori and Pacific social workers.
		19. Develop registration pathways which recognise indigenous forms of learning and practice.
		20. Partner with and empower local communities to support workforce development.

6	Ensure role clarity, coordination and collaboration with the social work-like workforce	*21. Model how the changing landscape of the social services sector may impact social work.*
		22. Understand enablers for social workers to practice at top of scope.
		23. SWRB collaborates with the sector on the Building Social Worker Capability project, which includes establishing NZQA recognised micro-credential standards for supervision and other practice areas for social workers as part of pre/post qualifications.
		24. Explore a National General or Field of Practice specific capabilities framework.
		25. Explore a career progression framework which would include a 'Pathway to retirement'
		26. Explore options for capabilities development: professional supervision, field education specialist, practice specialism (micro credentialing), practice leadership, social work management, and social work education and
		27. Explore a general post-qualifying pathway like the New Entry to Specialist Practice for Allied Mental Health.
		28. Build sector capability for collaboration
		29. Explore a leadership development pathway for social workers.

7	Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions: burnout	*30. Educate organisations around burnout*
		31. Ensure social workers are receiving supervision
		32. Support workplaces to be 'culturally safe' and mana-enhancing recognising the importance of identity toa kiritanga.
	high workloads	*33. Support organisations to address high workload*
		34. Gather insights on safe and appropriate caseloads
		35. Determine SWRB's position on high workloads as a potential risk to public safety.
		36. Develop shared workload management tools.
	work/life balance	*37. Support organisations to address work/life balance*
	poor pay	*38. Ensure pay agreements reflect the contribution social workers make to wider societal outcomes*
		39. Investigate and promote pay parity for all social workers
8	Improve digital capability, prepare for a future-orientated, tech-enabled profession	*40. Explore opportunities to enhance use of technology in social work practice and systems*
		41. Explore the risks and benefits of AI in practice and whether guidance or regulation is necessary to ensure public safety
		42. Support social workers to obtain and enhance technology literacy in the workplace.

Part 2:
Background information and proposed actions

Part 2 of this paper explores the 8 strategic priorities as critical concerns for social work that are not only persistent but escalating. Here, we identify what problem the strategic priority is addressing, discuss the underlying drivers, and importantly propose potential solutions for the sector to collectively action[12].

[12] *In action 32, referenced in Part 1,* ***'culturally safe'*** *is used as an aspirational term. Although this was not the original intention of Irihapeti Ramsden, who coined this term, we acknowledge the ambiguity associated with safety, as it can never be guaranteed. Within this action it is also recognised that there is a correlation between practice and* ***toa kiritanga*** *identity, both in the 'how' and the 'why', therefore, culture needs to be contextualised within an understanding of identity.*

Strategic Priority 1

Increase the supply of locally trained social workers

Increase the supply of locally trained social workers

The problem

There is a significant social worker shortage nationally, with a mismatch between the supply of social workers into the workforce and increased demand for social workers. Increasing the supply of locally trained social workers must be our primary focus, given they are uniquely trained to provide quality, culturally responsive practice within the Aotearoa New Zealand context while retaining their identity in who they are and the origins they have come from.

Since 2015, there has been a significant reduction in the number of social work students enrolling in social work programmes, and a high attrition rate of 45% once students have commenced studying[13]. The SWRB has indicated approximately 700 social workers are needed to address workforce shortages (albeit this number is very indicative), and attrition rates across the profession are, on average, 217 per year. From this, the total workforce demand can be roughly forecasted as 917 per year. However, social work graduation rates are only 494 per year, and of these graduates, only 395 (80%) on average go on to register as social workers.

2023/24 registration data suggests that there is currently a 173 shortfall in supply of new social workers into the workforce, however, when calculated using average student conversion (social workers qualified who go onto register), overseas registered and s13[14] registrant rates only, this shortfall could be as high as 350 social workers per year. This data shows that recruitment and retention issues for local social work programmes compound a workforce under significant pressure.

Underlying drivers

- **Workforce demographic**

Social work is facing the challenge of an aging workforce. SWRB data finds 1 in 5 social workers are 60 years of age or over and thus approaching retirement[15]. Retirement is the main reason for leaving the profession, with forecasting suggesting that 641 social workers are likely to leave the profession due to retirement over the next 5 years[16]. Retention rates remain problematic outside of anticipated retirement. Although intention to leave rates have dropped over the past year according to the SWRB Workforce report[17], updated forecasting still suggests that 1086 of the total social work practising workforce will leave the profession over the next 5 years.

[13] SWRB. (2024). *Annual Social Work Education Report 2023*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-work-education-report-2023/?tmstv=1744591630

[14] **S13** refers to the 'experience pathway' for social work registration under the Social Workers Registration Act 2003. This allows for applicants without recognised social work qualifications, but sufficient experience in social work to register and practice as a social worker. This section has been repealed and will cease in 2026.

[15] SWRB (2024). *Annual social worker workforce report 2024: A high-level overview of the social worker workforce in 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-worker-workforce-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

- **Student poverty**

The financial stress associated with study, particularly unpaid placements, is significant. The stress impacts wellbeing[18] and compounds difficulties in completing degrees[19]. Students commonly struggle to manage the demands of a social work programme whilst maintaining some level of paid employment to fund basic needs such as housing, food and transport. 33% of a cohort of social work students studied in 2019 experienced moderate financial hardship, whilst almost 7% reported severe hardship[20]. Unpaid placements have been cited by students as a significant source of financial stress and a barrier to achieving social work qualifications[21]. As a form of training, unpaid placements are increasingly viewed as exploitative on the global stage. The European Parliament banned unpaid internships, including placements, in 2023. Both Scotland and Australia have introduced paid training for social work and similar professions[22]. In Scotland, this has resulted in nearly doubling the nursing workforce and midwives have seen a 201% increase[23].

Even on completion of their degree, it takes social work students 10.6 years for their effective cumulative salary to exceed minimum wage when course fees are deducted. Social workers who take out a student loan and living expenses during study will work for 27.9 years before their salary reaches that of police colleagues (who are paid during training) because of training cost deductions[24]. This impacts equity in access to social work education, as students often require financial support from whānau to complete qualifications. Therefore, this is a significant barrier to entering the profession for those from less affluent backgrounds.

Additionally, nearly a quarter of social work students are over 40 years of age[25], yet modelling suggests that these social workers are unlikely to recoup the costs of training and earn more than a modest wage before reaching retirement age. It would make more economic sense for this group to continue in an unqualified role rather than invest in social work where the earning potential to recoup training costs remains so limited. This is a significant issue, as 'second career' social workers who may be moving from similar unqualified roles are perceived as workforce supply opportunities. The economic reality of training costs does not support this solution.

- **High attrition rates for social work education**

Social work education programmes experience very high attrition rates compared to similar

[18] Hodge L, McIntyre H, Morley C, Briese J, Clarke J, Kostecki T. (2024). My anxiety was through the roof: the gendered nature of financial stress and its impact on mental health and well-being for women when undertaking social work placements. *Affilia. 39(3):*499–516. doi:10.1177/08861099231225228

[19] Gair S, Baglow L. (2017). Australian social work students balancing study, work, and field placement: seeing it like it is. *Australian Social Work. 71(1):*46–57. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2017.1377741

[20] Beddoe, L. (2024). The impact of studying social work on student social wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand: struggling with incongruent demands. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 36(4),* 77- 91 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol36iss4id1214

[21] ANZASW. (2022). *Briefing Paper: Social Work Student Hardship.* https://community.anzasw.nz/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=6d11d251-5209-173c-fa28-85a3be4e2e47&forceDialog=1

[22] European Youth Forum. 2023, June 14. *European Parliament calls for banning unpaid internships.* European Youth Forum. https://www.youthforum.org/news/european-parliament-calls-for- banning-unpaid-internships

[23] The Scottish Government. 2021, December 23. *Nursing and midwifery student intake.* The Scottish Government. https://www.gov.scot/news/nursing-and-midwifery-student-intake/

[24] Watson, L. & Howells, B. (2025). Short-term pain for long-term gain? Financial implications of university fees and unpaid placements on workers in healthcare and education industries. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2025.2460575

[25] SWRB. (2024). *Annual Social Work Education Report 2023*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-work-education-report-2023/?tmstv=1744591630

professions[26]. Over recent years, the attrition rate has remained stable but high at around 45% for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programmes[27], yet it is unclear whether this measure is accurate due to the complexities associated with data collection. According to education providers, the highest rate of attrition occurs between the first and second year of a programme[28]. This suggests that data could be inadvertently capturing students undertaking related qualifications such as human services, or more likely, it is capturing students who enrol in social work without understanding the role, and consequently withdrawing when they realise it is not their desired profession. This reason for attrition should not be perceived as negative, yet it suggests more could be done to clearly articulate what social work involves, assisting career planning before enrolment.

As referenced in the student poverty section, unpaid placements have been cited by students as a significant barrier to achieving social work qualifications[29], yet these do not impact students until the third or fourth year of the BSW. Therefore, this reason for attrition likely makes up only a small percentage of the overall 45% attrition rate. Further analysis is required to better understand both the accuracy of the attrition rates and the reasons why students decide to leave social work programmes.

- **Inequities in access to social work education**

The financial burden associated with studying social work is a direct barrier for those wishing to enter social work from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, wider system-level barriers such as the costs of childcare, food and housing insecurity impact the participation of those from less affluent backgrounds in degree programmes, particularly for social work students who have whānau responsibilities.

Older student tends to have familial obligations that require financial outlay and support to navigate time to study, cost of studying, managing family demands, especially children and ensuring there is enough money to cover daily expenses.

Disproportionately, these issues impact students who are tangata whenua, Pacific peoples and those from diverse but perhaps less financially secure backgrounds. Yet social work requires diversity of workforce and life experience to remain effective in engaging with increasingly diverse whānau and communities. There is a need to improve financial support which allows access to education for anyone who wants to study social work.

Māori and Pacific peoples also experience inequities in access due to the way qualifications are predominantly structured and taught within a Western-centric education model. The emergence of bicultural social work programmes goes some way to addressing this inequity; however, choice is still limited, and financial and geographic barriers remain for Māori and Pacific students, despite the urgent need to grow this part of the workforce.

In 2005, the Labour Government established the NGO Social Work Study Awards in response to fewer

[26] Watson, L. & Howells, B. (2025). Short-term pain for long-term gain? Financial implications of university fees and unpaid placements on workers in healthcare and education industries. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2025.2460575

[27] SWRB. (2024). *Annual Social Work Education Report 2023*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-work-education-report-2023/?tmstv=1744591630

[28] Ibid.

[29] ANZASW. (2022). *Briefing Paper: Social Work Student Hardship.* https://community.anzasw.nz/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=6d11d251-5209-173c-fa28-85a3be4e2e47

social work graduates[30]. Payments were made to employers, who funded existing staff to complete a social work qualification. This policy response removed the financial barrier to study and facilitated entry to practice for Māori who made up 40% of the cohort[31]. No formal evaluation of this award was completed, yet 752 social workers qualified over 10 years[32]. It is unclear why funding ceased in 2017 other than perhaps budget constraints; therefore, revisiting this as a policy solution may be valid.

- **Public perception of social work**

It is often assumed by social workers that social work has a very poor public image, however, research does not verify this[33]. 44% of the general public indicated having 'some' or 'full' level of trust in social workers, this rate is on par with similar caring professions[34], indicating that social work does not have as negative an image as is often portrayed. Similarly, research from the United Kingdom has found that public perceptions of social workers are relatively positive, yet government policy documents repeatedly assert that social workers have a poor public image, without referencing sources[35]. This leads to the assumption that social work is not an attractive career choice and that recruitment into social work is negatively affected by public image when this may not be true. Is it important that the sector does not reinforce negative stereotypes portrayed by government policy documents and, at times, media[36], instead offering an alternative image of social work as valuable and fulfilling, which is more closely aligned with public perception of the profession[37].

Target measures

1. Increase capacity for social work education of students across sector by 10%
2. Decrease BSW attrition rate to below 40%

<u>Information gaps which require further exploration</u>

There is an information gap related to this priority which requires further exploration to help achieve the target measure and inform workforce planning:

- Why is the attrition rate between year 1 and year 2 of BSW programmes so high?

[30] Yeung, P., Mooney, H., English, A. & O'Donoghue, K. (2019). Non-government organization study awards: enhancing successful completion of social work qualification. *Social Work Education, 39(5),* 681-698. https://doi-org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/10.1080/02615479.2019.1696293

[31] Ibid

[32] Ibid

[33] Staniforth, B., Deane, K.L., & Beddoe, L. (2016). Comparing public perceptions of social work and social workers' expectations of the public view. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work 28(1),* 13-24.

[34] SWRB. (n.d). Public Trust in the Social Work Profession. https://swrb.govt.nz/exploring-public-trust-and-confidence-in-the-social-work-profession/#:~:text=Last%20year%2C%20the%20SWRB%20commissioned,work%20profession%20was%20not%20high.

[35] Hanley, J. (2024). The Social Work Public Perception Myth. *The British Journal of Social Work, Vol 55, 1.* 359-376.

[36] Stanfield, D. & Beddoe, L. (2013). Social work and the media: A collaborative challenge. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 25(4)*. 41-51.

[37] Ibid.

ACTIONS

To increase the supply of locally trained social workers

1. Leverage understanding of students needs to enable fit-for-purpose responses.	· *Develop targeted opportunities for supporting tangata whenua and tangata Pasifika ākonga with familial obligations.* · *Determine whether streamlining of social work programmes is required.* · *Identify the range of possible BSW structures that would be appropriate for the Aotearoa context, ensure graduate readiness for practice, maintain international recognition and minimise student hardship.* · *Promote the Master's Applied pathway to students completing undergraduate degrees in a related discipline.* · *Explore length of study as a possible disincentive. For example, three-years study plus one-year paid internship may help alleviate the onus of hardship.* · *Ensure social work programmes are reflective of indigenous ways of knowing, doing and being which enables tangata whenua and the diversity of ākonga to feel represented and that programmes are relevant to their communities.* · *Ensure social work programmes are decolonised in both content and delivery.* · *Enable faster qualification pathways by allowing greater recognition of prior knowledge and experience.*
2. Increase the attraction of studying social work.	· *Develop marketing/communication campaigns to:* · *promote attraction into social work as a desirable profession.* · *make different pathways more explicit, e.g. those with a relevant / transferable degree.* · *strengthen relationships with Iwi and Pacific communities to promote social work as a career pathway.* · *Strengthen links and visibility within kura and communities to promote youth pathways into social work.* · *Partner with kura and Māori and Pacific communities to promote the relevance of social work for working within these communities.*

3. Understand and reduce the financial barriers to studying social work.	*Understand and mitigate financial barriers for studying social work:* *· Identify previous funding initiatives and when initiatives ceased.* *· Map available support avenues for students through scholarships, hardship funds and other opportunities, both nationally and across institutions.* *· Explore how the profession can promote available support, and help students to navigate the challenges of hardship during placements* *· Explore opportunities to have social work reclassified in tertiary education, and therefore able to attract more funding.* *· Explore the availability, improve visibility and advocate for an increase of scholarships and grants for tangata whenua and Pacific to study social work.*
4. Explore wider supports that enable students to complete their study.	*Explore wider professional/pastoral supports that enable students to complete their study:* *· Understand from students (current and prospective) what types of wider support (including iwi and cultural supports) would enable them to complete their programmes.* *· Identify examples of student retention in study, and what initiatives may be transferable/scalable.* *· Explore whether students would engage in student support programmes if offered by ANZASW.*
5. Understand and grow the capacity of the education sector to support increasing enrolment rates.	*· Determine current capacity across both mainstream tertiary institutions and wānanga to deliver social work programmes.* *· Identify ways to increase capacity to deliver programmes.* *· Identify factors to improve the attractiveness and sustainability of social work educator workforce, particularly tangata whenua educators.* *· Build capacity within providers to build and maintain close relationships with local iwi and kaupapa Māori organisations to support tangata whenua students throughout their degree and offer placement options which align with student aspirations to work with their communities.*

Strategic Priority 2

Increase the number of overseas qualified social workers

Increase the number of overseas qualified social workers

The problem

Aotearoa New Zealand has a limited population, and we cannot meet the growing demand for social workers with our current population. Overseas-trained social workers provide an alternative opportunity for workforce growth which cannot be met locally.

Given the shortage of social workers, the profession was amongst 32 new 'health roles' added to the Green List in 2023. Addition to the Green List, allows for a fast-tracked pathway to residency in New Zealand that is not available for many other migrants.

If locally qualified registration rates remain stagnant at 395, without continuation of a s13 pathway, overseas registrations would need to reach 522 to fill current workforce vacancies. This would amount to 57% of Social Workers added to the workforce, highly disproportionate to current rates of 17%.

Whilst overseas qualified social workers make an important contribution to the workforce, strategically, recruitment should be proportionate to locally trained social workers, in particular, tangata whenua social workers. This is because the practice context of Aotearoa New Zealand differs significantly from other countries. As a profession, we are committed to bicultural and indigenous practice, and our client base in social services is disproportionately Māori, therefore, a sound knowledge base around te ao Māori, te ao ā Iwi and cultural / indigenous responsiveness, as well as the importance of identity are essential for effective practice. Without this knowledge, there is a risk of re-adopting predominantly Eurocentric frameworks and approaches at both practice and policy level, which would further marginalise Māori and erode the values of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand, thereby undermining the values of rangatiratanga and mana motuhake[38].

Underlying drivers

- **International competition for social workers**

Aotearoa New Zealand is not an attractive work setting from a financial perspective; social workers are paid approximately 79% of an average Australian wage and 70% of an equivalent United Kingdom wage[39]. Qualification requirements are similar, and cost of living is roughly on par, therefore Aotearoa New Zealand remains an unattractive work destination from an economic perspective. It is likely that social workers moving to our country do so for reasons outside of work such as lifestyle or family.

- **Visa processes and obtaining employment**

Visa processes and obtaining employment for non-Australian overseas qualified social workers has been described as lengthy and difficult.

The two main visas social workers enter Aotearoa New Zealand under, are the Skilled Migrant Category

[38] **Mana Motuhake** - separate identity, autonomy, self-government, self-determination, independence, sovereignty, authority - mana through self-determination and control over one's own destiny (Te Aka Māori Dictionary)

[39] Calculations have used average salary data from indeed.com, which calculates an average NZ social work salary to be $78,886 per year- this would be equivalent to between step 5 and 6 on the community and iwi pay equity scale.

Residence Visa and the Straight to Residence Visa[40]. Both carry the requirement of currently working for or having a job offer from an accredited employer in Aotearoa New Zealand[41]. This is a significant barrier for overseas social workers, who find it difficult to secure employment prior to relocating. Additionally, 29% of the social work workforce is employed by NGOs, many of whom are small and not an 'accredited employer'. This further limits employment opportunities for social workers intending to immigrate.

The social work job market is highly sensitive to political changes and the wider funding and contracting environment, given nearly all agency work is government-funded in some capacity. Agencies tend to seek applicants who have local experience unless they employ enough social workers to sufficiently cushion the impact of local knowledge gaps. Additionally, employers can only make job offers to registered social workers, therefore, overseas social workers must have secured provisional registration prior to making job enquiries to meet visa requirements.

- **Registration processes for overseas applicants**

Registration application processes are lengthy for overseas applicants; therefore, it is unlikely that prospective employers would make an offer to a candidate who is awaiting registration, as it would result in carrying an unfilled position for months, a situation that many employers cannot manage.

Registration costs for practising social work in Aotearoa New Zealand are expensive compared to jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom[42]. To become registered here, overseas social workers must pay SWRB:

- $635 application fee
- $1012 provisional registration competence assessment fee

If successful, they will be provisionally registered and must further pay:

- $540 annual practising certificate fee
- $219 disciplinary levy

After completing 2000 hours of local social work practice, overseas social workers must pay an additional $1012 for a full registration competence assessment.

The total cost for overseas social workers to obtain full registration and practice as a social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand is $4117. This represents a considerable relocation expense, particularly given many social workers likely take a pay cut to practice here.

Target Measure

- 20% of annual new registrations are overseas social workers

[40] Immigration New Zealand. (n.d). *Visas that allow you to work.* https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/visa-lists/all-work-visas
[41] Immigration New Zealand. (n.d).*Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa.* https://www.immigration.govt.nz/new-zealand-visas/visas/visa/skilled-migrant-category-resident-visa
[42] Social Work England. (2025). *Registration Fees*. https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/registration/registration-fees/

ACTIONS

To increase numbers of overseas qualified social workers

6. Promote attraction and recruitment of overseas qualified social workers	· *Explore opportunities for relocation support and/or other incentives i.e., published Q&A, community of practice.* · *Support organisations to have streamlined recruitment pathways.*
7. Support overseas qualified social workers to be 'workplace ready'.	· *Streamline the recognition of international qualifications with particular countries.* · *Understand how overseas social workers are supported towards competencies 1 and 2 and develop education towards competencies 1 and 2 if required.* · *Develop guidance for supervisors to promote the learning focus within supervision and orientation to the unique contexts of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand.* · *Develop a micro-credential for overseas qualified social workers provided by tertiary education providers.* · *Ensure any micro-credential or competence pathway is strongly founded in decolonisation; the history of and current impacts of colonisation in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, te ao Māori practice perspectives and equity.*
8. Identify opportunities to streamline the overseas registration model to reduce costs.	· *Explore opportunities to replicate Australian qualification pathway with other jurisdictions.* · *Explore alternative assessment models which could streamline process.*

Strategic Priority 3

Increase number of social workers with a practicing certificate

Increase number of social workers with a practicing certificate

The problem

The number of students completing their social work qualification remained constant in 2022 at 462 graduates. Of those graduates, 18% did not register with SWRB the following year[43]; this is referred to as a 'conversion rate'. Lower-than-anticipated conversion rates have implications for forecasting and being able to predict patterns in our workforce pipeline in coming years, as modelling cannot reliably predict supply from existing student numbers.

Additionally, there are 12,449 registered social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand, yet only 9135 practising certificates were issued in 2023/2024[44]. This shows that there are 3314 registered social workers across Aotearoa New Zealand, who are currently not being utilised in the workforce. Explanations such as maternity leave or other types of long absences will account for some of these numbers, however, this number represents a significant information gap regarding why social workers are not practising and whether barriers could be removed to increase workforce participation.

Underlying drivers

- **Model of social work regulation**

The Social Workers Registration Act 2003 sets out the model for funding regulatory functions as 'user pays'[45]. This is a cost-recovery model of regulation which transfers regulatory costs directly to social workers through annual practising certificate fees and a disciplinary levy. Regulatory fees have an exponential ripple effect on the social work workforce stability. Social workers pay $759 per year to remain practising[46], this is a flat rate regardless of hours of work or earnings. Flat rate fees contribute to attrition, as social workers who wish to reduce their working hours due to semi-retirement or health reasons report having to leave the profession entirely because regulatory costs are unreasonable when only working a few hours per week. The impact of this on the social work profession is significant; experience and expertise are lost, particularly in practice areas like supervision, where these social workers offer a vital contribution.

Regulatory costs have been steadily increasing, despite predictions that mandatory regulation would decrease costs[47]. In 2024, social workers experienced a $154 increase in regulatory fees, which included a 62% rise in disciplinary levy[48]. 80% of social workers have their regulatory fees paid by employers[49], however, they are increasingly covered at the expense of adequate staffing levels, funded

[43] SWRS (2023). *Annual social work workforce report: A high-level overview of the social work workforce.*
[44] SWRB (2024). *SWRB Annual Report 2023-2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/swrb-annual-report-2023-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[45] S 86 and S.109, 110 of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003.
[46] SWRB (n.d). *Ngā utu me te tuku pūtea Fees and funding*. https://swrb.govt.nz/registration/fees/
[47] Ministry of Social Development. (2017). *Regulatory Impact Statement: Legislative changes to increase the professionalism of the social work workforce*. https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/regulatory-impact-statements/swra-ris.pdf
[48] SWRB. (n.d). *Social Workers Registration Board Decision on fees and levy changes 2024.* https://swrb.govt.nz/fees-and-levy-change-decision-2024/
[49] SWRB (2024). *SWRB Annual Report 2023-2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/swrb-annual-report-2023-2024/?tmstv=1744500828

professional development or other professional supports. Part-time social workers are often only funded for their registration fees at pro-rata rates, despite flat rate registration costs, and private practitioners are liable for all regulatory costs. Social workers often reach out to ANZASW as their professional body, articulating their worry and distress around affording regulatory fees. This cost-recovery regulation model creates barriers to entry and retention in the profession and exacerbates existing workforce shortages through shifting a substantial financial burden onto individual social workers.

- **Low conversion rates**

Only 80% of social work students who complete their qualification go on to register with SWRB[50]. This means approximately 94 potential social workers are lost each year, a significant contribution to the workforce supply. This has been a stable pattern over recent years, yet there is currently no explanation as to why this 'conversion rate' from qualification to registration is so low. Some potential issues have been identified and are explored below.

- **Financial barriers to provisional registration**

The financial barrier for newly qualified social workers applying for registration is being considered by SWRB. Students completing their qualification are required to pay at least $200 as a 'deferred payment' towards their registration costs. This policy spans all registration applications, there is no dedicated financial pathway for newly qualified students who are not yet earning. This cost has been raised as a significant barrier for graduating students obtaining registration. It is possible that newly qualified social workers are not committing to registration costs, or hoping prospective employers will cover these costs, and so do not seek registration until they have secured a social work role.

- **Difficulty securing new-graduate roles**

Some education providers have anecdotally noted that students are finding it increasingly difficult to secure roles following the completion of their degree, as there is a market preference for experience within the constrained contracting environment.

Only 50% of employers surveyed in 2024 advised they have specific pathways to support newly qualified social workers, these include informal peer support approaches, structured inductions or formal programmes[51]. However, some newly qualified roles require commitment to further study like the 'New Entry to Specialist Practice' Programme in Mental Health and Addictions[52]. This may not be attractive to newly qualified social workers who have just spent up to 4 years completing their degree.

It is also reported that some funding contracts, particularly in health, specify the level of expertise required by stating that a 'fully registered' professional must fill the position. Such contract specifications immediately restrict newly qualified and overseas social workers who are seeking provisional registration from applying for the role. Such specifications create an unnecessary barrier to employment for newly qualified social workers that could be impacting conversion rates.

[50] SWRB. (2024). *Annual Social Work Education Report 2023*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-work-education-report-2023/?tmstv=1744591630
[51] SWRB (2024). *Social Workers Employers Report 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/social-worker-employers-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[52] https://www.tepou.co.nz/training-development/grants/nesp-allied-mental-health-and-addiction

- **Deflection to 'social work-like' roles**

It is possible that some newly qualified social workers are taking on 'social work-like' roles and employers are not seeking registration for them, arguing that they are not 'doing social work'. This is a particularly grey area of social work regulation, as any person who holds a social work qualification and undertakes anything that resembles social work *must* register and obtain a practising certificate. However, it is unclear how this can be monitored across the provider system if they are not employed into a 'social work role'. Social work-like roles are generally cheaper for employers as the pay scale is lower and there are no associated professional costs like registration and practising certificates, therefore, there are some motivating factors present. SWRB's 2024 employer survey indicated that 92% of employers are aware of legislative requirements attached to the role of social worker[53], therefore, this underlying driver may be very small, if a factor at all for conversion or non-practising rates.

- **Misidentification as 'non-practising'**

As SWRB has only developed a 'general scope of practice', social workers often convey confusion when moving from direct practice into meso or macro-based settings regarding whether they are required to maintain their registration as 'practising'. Some misconceptions appear to exist regarding the use of the term 'practising' despite this applying to a wide range of tasks which would still fall under the social work scope of practice, like policy and research roles, education roles, supervision roles, and consultancy roles, amongst others.

If social workers are declaring themselves as 'non-practising' on this basis, it is unlikely to impact on workforce supply as regaining the status of 'practising' would not alter their workforce contribution. However, further clarity and consistent guidance for social workers would ensure the number of practising social workers is being accurately captured in workforce data and planning.

Measure/Target

- Increase qualification conversation rate from 80% to 95%

<u>Information gaps which require further exploration</u>

There is the need to better understand the profile of the 3000 people on the register who do not hold a practicing certificate and identify if there are any barriers to entering/re-entering the workforce.

[53] SWRB (2024) *Social Worker Employers Report 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/social-worker-employers-report-2024/?tmstv=1743378372

ACTIONS

Increase number of social workers with a practicing certificate

9. Understand the rationale for why some qualified social workers are choosing not to register.	· *Undertake research with this cohort to identify rationale and any barriers to obtaining registration.* · *Reduce any barriers identified for newly qualified social workers in obtaining registration.*
10. Better understand the profiles of registered social workers without practising certificates.	· *Identify if there are barriers to entering/re-entering the workforce.*
11. Develop an action plan to reduce barriers for entering/re-entering the workforce.	*Develop an action plan, which may include:* · *Supporting a return to practice.* · *Encouraging new entrant pathways to be implemented by all social work employers, to encourage recruitment and support of newly qualified social workers.* · *Developing resources which clarify what type of work requires registration even if not a 'social work role'.* · *Supporting the introduction of lower threshold payment options for completing students applying for provisional registration with SWRB.*
12. Review the regulatory funding model to reduce the financial burden on social workers and employers.	· *Work towards a more sustainable funding model for registration and APCs.* · *Consider alternative registration fee pathways for students and others returning to practice.*

Strategic Priority 4

Ensure alternative pathways exist for the recognition of prior learning and experience to lead to social work registration

Ensure alternative pathways exist for the recognition of prior learning and experience to lead to social work registration

The problem

In 2026 the experience pathway for registration under s13 of the SWR Act will cease. This means that the only pathways into social work will be through local or overseas qualifications. 6% of new registrations in 2023/24 were via the s13 pathway, this amounts to 45 social workers. Approximately 2% of the total practising workforce are registered via the s13 pathway, this is approximately 183 social workers across the country. Although this represents a small number of the total workforce, a quarter of s13 applicants are Māori[54], demonstrating that it is an important mechanism to enhance equity for Māori in entering social work. Solely recognising academic qualifications, framed within western models of learning, risks further entrenching colonisation into social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. Alternative pathways for learning and recognition of experience for registration are vital to ensuring a profession which upholds our obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, actively dismantling colonial notions of what knowledge, qualification and experience are valid for social work practice.

Underlying drivers

- **Need to value lived experience**

Social work education which leads to registration is not attainable for many who bring significant experience caring for communities and working with people in a way which directly reflects social work's core values and ethics. It is important that a pathway which recognises this prior experience, skill and learning can be retained for registration. Without this, social work as a profession will experience not only the opportunity loss in workforce numbers but will also see a loss of diversity in our workforce given the dominance of Western education as the only pathway to enter.

The NGO study awards successfully reduced the barrier for Māori attaining a social work qualification[55], yet without an equivalent programme which reduces the barriers to qualification and registration, there is a risk of worsening inequities and diluting the cultural responsiveness and identity of our workforce unless the s13 pathway is replaced.

- **No progression pathway from the social work-like workforce**

There is currently a large unqualified workforce which will remain untapped should s13 cease without an

[54] Ministry of Social Development, (2023). *Cabinet Paper: Extending the Experience Pathway for Social Worker Registration*. https://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/information-releases/cabinet-papers/2024/amendment-to-the-social-workers-registration-legislation-amendment-bill/paper-extending-the-experience-pathway-for-social-worker-registration.pdf

[55] Yeung, P., Mooney, H., English, A. & O'Donoghue, K. (2019). Non-government organization study awards: enhancing successful completion of social work qualification. *Social Work Education, 39(5),* 681-698. https://doi-org.ezproxy.auckland.ac.nz/10.1080/02615479.2019.1696293

'experience-related' alternative, such as a structured vocational education pathway[56]. Social workers are increasingly reliant on this unregulated workforce with 30% of social workers identifying this as a challenge in 2024 compared to 18% in 2023[57].

Without a pathway to registration which recognises prior experience and learning in the wider sector, competition for contracts and over-reliance on support roles for increasingly complex work remains a real risk.

Other professions such as engineering have piloted New Zealand's first degree-level apprenticeship to address declining degree enrolments, a model which has similarities to international examples which bridge the gap between experience and the theoretical components of professional degrees[58],[59]. Such a pathway that aims to assist social-work like roles to attain required social work academic knowledge that leads to registration, could be a way to encourage career progression from unregulated roles into social work.

Target Measure

- An alternative experience pathway to registration for social work-like kaimahi is agreed before the cessation of s13 in 2026
- 5% of newly registered workforce continue to register through an experience pathway

[56] **Vocational education** is a type of education that focuses on providing skills and knowledge directly applicable to a certain job, often through industry-led, workplace learning.
[57] SWRB (2024). *Annual social worker workforce report 2024: A high-level overview of the social worker workforce in 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-worker-workforce-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[58] Mackay, J., Cadzow, H. (2022). Developing an Engineering Degree Apprenticeship with a Pathway in Infrastructure Asset Management. In: Chan, S., Huntington, N. (eds) *Reshaping Vocational Education and Training in Aotearoa New Zealand. Professional and Practice-based Learning, Vol 34,* (pp. 279-287). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12168-5_15
[59] Tertiary Education Commission Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua. (2018). *Pilot of degree apprenticeship model underway in New Zealand [Press Release].* https://www.tec.govt.nz/news-and-consultations/archived-news/pilot-of-degree-apprenticeship-model-underway-in-new-zealand/

ACTIONS

Ensure alternative pathways exist for the recognition of prior learning and experience to lead to social work registration

13. Establish alternative registration pathways, including a vocational educational pathway to replace s13.	· *When the s13 pathway ends, consider other pathways to registration that enable Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and experience.* · *Ensure a decolonised pathway to registration recognises mātauranga Māori and prior experience essential to social work, as determined by iwi and Māori sector leaders.*
14. Develop assessment systems for the recognition of prior learning.	· *Develop robust assessment systems with TEIs for the recognition of RPL to maintain a full experience pathway into the profession and that assessment systems are recognising of the kete mātauranga and mohiotanga that the applicant already holds.*
15. Explore skill standards and micro- credentials within programmes which may lead onto social work pathway.	· *Develop skill standards and micro-credentials across the NZQCF framework which could be used within programmes for those who wish to pathway into social work and are recognised by TEO's as appropriate prior learning.*
16. Explore work-based, vocational education learning programmes which could lead to social work registration.	· *Explore work-based, vocational education learning programmes to attain social work qualifications which can lead to registration.* · *Ensure vocational training retains the diversity of knowledge and practice beyond the work-place setting.*

Strategic Priority 5

Ensure equitable workforce outcomes for Māori & Pacific social workers

Ensure equitable workforce outcomes for Māori & Pacific social workers

The problem

A thriving Māori and Pacific social work workforce is critical for responding to the needs of Māori and Pacific tamariki, children, whānau and families, disproportionally represented across the population requiring services from social workers.

Social work has achieved representation within our workforce for Māori when compared to general population statistics. 25% or 1 in 4 social workers are Māori, compared to 17.1% of the general population in New Zealand[60]. This is a great achievement for the profession as it is much higher than equivalent workforces such as nursing, however, workforce should reflect the social work client base, so there is a need to grow Māori representation significantly. In some fields or practice, Māori make up to 69% of the client base[61], therefore growing the tangata whenua workforce is important to ensure effective and culturally responsive services that are also cognisant of tiakitanga and tikanga. Similarly, Pacific People are represented at rates of approximately 17% across some services[62] so there is a need to grow the number of Pacific social workers from the current 12%.

Underlying drivers

- **Information gaps as to representation of Māori and Pacific in social work leadership**

Current data does not provide insight into which fields or agencies Māori and Pacific social workers are currently located. Nor do we have insight into their representation in leadership and management positions.

Equitable outcomes rely on equitable representation in decision-making through leadership and management roles. This can support developing and maintaining culturally/indigenous responsive and safe work environments for Māori and Pacific social workers, access to culturally/indigenous appropriate supervision, professional development and the promotion of te ao Māori, Pacific and other culturally/indigenous responsive practice frameworks which contribute to enhancing services and outcomes. Addressing this information gap is vital to measuring equitable workforce outcomes for Māori and Pacific social workers that also take into consideration identity and places of origin.

- **Māori and Pacific social workers carry additional 'cultural/tikanga loads' within organisations**

Research suggests that tangata whenua experience additional cultural/tikanga loads in the workplace[63].

[60] Statistics NZ, (2024). *Māori population estimates: At 30 June 2024*. https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/maori-population-estimates-at-30-june-2024/
[61] Aroturuki Tamariki Independent Children's Monitor. (2024). *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa 2022/2023. Our context.* https://aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-20222023-our-context
[62] Aroturuki Tamariki Independent Children's Monitor. (2024). *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa 2022/2023. Our context.* https://aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-20222023-our-context.
[63]

Cultural/tikanga load refers to tasks, duties and obligations delegated to workers on the basis of their identity[64], yet they are expected to be performed without additional remuneration. This could look like always being asked to lead karakia or acting as a cultural/tikanga resource for colleagues. Such expectations, when not recognised, can result in higher levels of burnout in the workplace, with Māori burnout rates double that of Pākehā[65]. Due to this dynamic, Māori and likely, Pacific social workers, experience higher workload expectations, particularly in non-Māori organisations, directly contributing to burnout and inequitable workforce outcomes.

Target Measure

- Target of 33% of social work workforce is Māori
- Target of 15% of social work workforce is Pacific
- 40% of leadership positions in social work are held by Māori or Pacific kaimahi

Information gaps which require further exploration

There is a need to regularly collect the demographic breakdown of leadership positions across the sector to track and monitor equity for Māori and Pacific in leadership, recognising that leadership can be determined in different ways.

[64] Tipene-Leach D., Simmonds S., Haggie H., Mills V., Riddell T., & Carter M. (2024). *The 'Colonial Tax': Cultural Loading of Māori Doctors.* Te ORA (Te Ohu Rata o Aotearoa, Māori Medical Practitioners Association) and Te Tāhū Hauora (Health Quality and Safety Commission).

[65] https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/mapuna/audio/2018837609/workforce-burnout-amongst-maori-has-skyrocketed

ACTIONS

Ensure equitable workforce outcomes for Māori & Pacific social workers

17. Promote Māori and Pacific social workers in leadership.	· *Develop insights into the ethnicity breakdown of leadership positions across social work, to accurately capture Māori and Pacific representation and promote equity in leadership.* · *Promote mentoring of Māori and Pacific leaders within and across organisations.*
18. Develop leadership programmes for Māori and Pacific social workers.	· *Explore the development of leadership programmes for Māori and Pacific social workers in collaboration with iwi, kaupapa Māori and Pacific providers.*
19. Develop registration pathways which recognise indigenous forms of learning and practice.	· *Support the development of pathways into social work registration which recognise indigenous forms of learning and practice as an alternative to academic learning.*
20. Partner with and empower local communities to support workforce development.	· *Promote mentoring of Māori and Pacific leaders from within and across communities.* · *Ensure local community and iwi / hapū leaders are involved in workforce development decisions.*

Strategic Priority 6

Ensure role clarity, coordination and collaboration with the social work-like workforce

Ensure role clarity, coordination and collaboration with the social work-like workforce

The problem

An unintended consequence of social work regulation has been competition within some parts of the wider social services sector. Where organisations struggle to fill social work vacancies due to a shortfall in supply or funding, they may change job titles from "social workers" and rather opt for role titles such as "support workers"[66] so that category 3 kaimahi can be employed. This revision of title must not however become a rationale for potential exploitation and devaluing of work.

The 2022 Pay Equity Extension for Social Workers in the Funded Social Sector (pay equity extension) identified 1,400 unregulated category 3 workers. Category 3 workers (defined for the purposes of the pay equity claim) undertake work that is substantially similar and proximate to registered social workers. They receive varying levels of supervision and oversight from registered professionals (eligible to be registered, but not necessarily registered), including registered social workers. The SWRB is undertaking work to better understand social work-like roles, including considering how public safety in relation to this unregulated workforce could be strengthened[67].

As a social service sector, we must consider the workforce as a whole, with the unique contribution that social workers make, alongside social worker-like roles and other practicing kaimahi. Noting the SWRB's emphasis on upholding public safety, as a social work sector, we could take the lead in identifying practice initiatives such as a national framework for delegation and skill sharing between regulated and non-regulated workforce and identifying changing capabilities, for example, the increased utilisation of partnered approaches and multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and transdisciplinary models of practice that tiaki the diversity in knowledge and practice while upholding the rangatiratanga of identity in the tūhonohono of collaboration.

Underlying drivers

- **Lower employment costs**

Rescoping roles to allow employing social work-like kaimahi may be a mechanism for agencies to reduce the employment costs of hiring social workers. Employing social workers carries costs such as registration, annual practising certificates, disciplinary levies, supervision and professional development, all of which are registration requirements for social workers.

[66] SWRB (2022). *Annual social work education report 2022*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-work-education-report-2022/?tmstv=1744591630
[67] SWRB. (2024). *Social Worker-like Kaimahi Report 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/swrb-social-worker-like-kaimahi-report-2024/?tmstv=1744591630

In 2024, 12% of social workers surveyed said they were aware of roles in their organisation that had changed from regulated social work roles, to unregulated 'social work-like' roles, which was similar to the results from 2023 and 2022 (12% and 11%, respectively)[68]. This suggests that a small amount of re-scoping of roles may be occurring in response to increasing regulatory costs associated with social workers.

- **Social work as a profession is title protected, not scope protected**

Whilst the Social Workers Registration Act 2003 prevents kaimahi from using the title 'social worker' unless they are registered, it does not place restrictions on any practice or tasks which are associated with social work. The general scope of practice developed by SWRB is wide, therefore, social work-like kaimahi often find themselves performing tasks which are included in this scope. This dynamic does present challenges as there is no clear delineation between social worker roles and social work-like kaimahi, unless this is specified in a funding contract. Decisions on whether a social worker is preferred for a role are often at the discretion of agencies.

- **A career progression framework could serve a dual purpose of promoting retention of social workers throughout their careers and a transparent pathway for social-work like kaimahi into social work**

A lack of career progression opportunities is cited as a factor in social workers leaving the profession. Employers have siloed approaches (if at all) within organisations for career progression. Further, due to a generic scope of social work practice there tends to be a siloed view of capabilities required across fields of practice.

- **Changing social service sector landscape**

The social sector landscape is changing. For example, as signalled by Oranga Tamariki in their Strategic Intentions document[69], their strategic direction involves building strong locally-led partnerships with iwi-Māori, community groups and service providers. This means resourcing and enabling a wider response and coordinating across the children's system while focusing Oranga Tamariki delivery effort on only the most complex situations within its broad responsibilities. In short, social workers will be focused on the most complex and challenging work, with the support of a broader workforce to respond to need. Workforce composition, however, should be driven by the needs of tamariki and whānau and not be driven by budgetary constraints that result in revised contract criteria.

Target Measure

- Less than 5% of social workers reporting changes in regulated to unregulated roles within their organisation.
- Intention to leave due to a lack of career progression reduces to 10%.

[68] SWRB (2024*). Annual social worker workforce report 2024: A high-level overview of the social worker workforce in 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-worker-workforce-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828

[69] Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Children. (2024). *Strategic Intentions 2024/25- 2029/30*. Oranga Tamariki Strategic Intentions 2024/25 - 2029/30

ACTIONS

Ensure role clarity, coordination and collaboration with the social work-like workforce

21. Model how the changing landscape of the social services sector may impact social work.	· *Model the changing landscape of the social services sector and what this means for potential changes to the nature, role and function of social workers.* · *Explore how this links to the development of a capabilities framework.*
22. Understand enablers for social workers to practice at top of scope.	· *Understand requirements and develop practice enablers that support social workers to practice to top of scope, promote role clarity and enable social workers and social work-like roles to work cohesively together.* · *This may include:* • *Developing a national framework for delegation and skill sharing.* • *Developing best practice guidance on partnered approaches.* · *Include tangata whenua, indigenous knowledges and practices, which are instrumental enablers.*
23. SWRB collaborates with the sector on the Building Social Worker Capability project, which includes establishing NZQA recognised micro-credential standards for supervision and other practice areas for social workers as part of pre/post qualifications.	· *Foster collaboration and whole-of-sector co-design on the Building Social Worker Capability project.* · *Explore feasibility, risks and benefits, and both intended and unintended outcomes for introducing NZQA micro-credentials for practice areas, including tangata whenua and indigenous knowledges.*
24. Explore a National General or Field of Practice specific capabilities framework.	· *Explore feasibility, risks and benefits and both intended and unintended outcomes of a general and practice-specific capabilities framework.* · *Ensure capabilities framework specifically includes tangata whenua and indigenous knowledges.*

25. Explore a career progression framework which would include a 'Pathway to retirement'	· *Explore the feasibility and preferred model for introducing a career progression framework, ensuring that it is not based on or determined by a purely Eurocentric perspective.*
26. Explore options for capabilities development: professional supervision, field education specialist, practice specialism (micro credentialing), practice leadership, social work management, and social work education and research.	· *Complete scoping, analysis and feasibility for potential capabilities development.*
27. Explore a general post-qualifying pathway like the New Entry to Specialist Practice for Allied Mental Health.	· *Complete scoping, analysis and feasibility of introducing such a pathway and determine options for delivery and administration.*
28. Build sector capability for collaboration	· *Establish shared forums for discussion and decision making based on concepts of tiaki, trust, transparency and accountability to each other and communities.*
29. Explore a leadership development pathway for social workers.	· *Integrate a leadership pathway into career progression and capabilities framework.* · *Ensure 'leadership' includes Māori-led initiatives rather than promoting only Eurocentric concepts of leadership.* · *Develop pathways which support diverse leaders into key positions across the profession.*

Strategic Priority 7

Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions

Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions

The problem

Workforce shortages perpetuate challenges in retaining social workers. 41% of social workers who indicated they have intentions to leave the profession in the 2024 workforce survey, listed reasons such as burnout, poor work/life balance, high workloads and poor pay[70], which may be mitigated through effective workforce planning strategies.

Addressing burnout

28% of social workers who indicated their intention to leave the profession say this is due to high workload/burnout. According to this data, at least 304 social workers may be lost due to this issue over the next 5 years. Burnout is exacerbated by the symptoms of workforce shortages such as high workloads and a reduced sense of autonomy and respect, which leads to the loss of 'compassion satisfaction', a term used to describe a social worker's sense of achievement, making a difference and seeing positive outcomes in their client's lives[71]. Burnout is also evident when tangata whenua social workers are constantly navigating organisational systems that dismiss tangata whenua perspectives, particularly in relation to contract criteria, and are dominated by eurocentric processes and views. Burnout is therefore systemic in origin, yet many organisations promote individual strategies such as mindfulness and resilience training to address burnout, even though the evidence for these is limited[72].

Supervision can act as an important protective factor, supporting social workers to identify and address burnout and remain in their role[73]. However, social workers experiences of supervision are inconsistent[74], therefore promoting quality supervision relationships could be an effective sector-wide strategy to reduce burnout.

Underlying drivers - burnout:

- **Difficulties filling vacancies**

Where vacancies exist, it takes on average three and a half months to fill a vacant social work position due to a lack of suitable candidates/skill shortage[75]. 70% of employers indicate that filling social work

[70] SWRB (2024). *Annual social worker workforce report 2024: A high-level overview of the social worker workforce in 2024.* https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-worker-workforce-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[71] Wagaman, M.A., Geiger, J.M., Shockley, C. & Segal, E.A. (2015). The Role of Empathy in Burnout, Compassion Satisfaction, and Secondary Traumatic Stress among Social Workers. *Social Work, 60(3,)* 201-209. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24881483.
[72] Klein, A., Taieb, O., Xavier, S., Baubet, T., & Reyre,A. (2020). The benefits of mindfulness-based interventions on burnout among health professionals: A systematic review. *EXPLORE,16(1)* 35-43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2019.09.002
[73] Hirst, V. (2019). Burnout in Social Work: The Supervisor's Role. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work 31(3),* 122-126. https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol31iss3id653
[74] ANZASW, (2024). *ANZASW Supervision Strategy*. https://www.anzasw.nz/public/150/files/Advocacy/240326%20Supervision%20Strategy%20PUBLISHED.pdf
[75] SWRB (2024) *Social Worker Employers Report 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/social-worker-employers-report-2024/?tmstv=1743378372

vacancies is challenging, with 20% stating it is 'highly challenging'[76]. Challenges relate to attracting what employers consider to be suitable candidates, however, employers indicate that this is not to do with qualification, experience or knowledge but 'team fit'[77]. There is no explanation for this term, so it is difficult to establish what employers consider under this term and whether there are specific barriers to recruitment related to 'team fit' which could be addressed.

- **Increasing complexity and need**

There is increasing need and vulnerability for service users. The increasing complexity of cases, financial and other pressures on families and communities were often mentioned as reasons for social workers leaving, along with the negative coverage of social workers in the media and public domain. Many social workers surveyed have described increased abuse from clients as a challenge, impacting on their intention to remain in the profession and contributing to social workers feeling unsafe in their day-to-day work. This interpersonal dynamic is heavily influenced by wider social conditions and attitudes, particularly when oppressive colonial ideas around productivity and identity limit access to public services. Tangata whenua and other marginalised groups are most impacted by changes to access and are over-represented in the social work client base. Increasing need, complexity and vulnerability are therefore symptomatic of social inequality and should be addressed by improving living conditions for these groups through policy and system design.

- **Fiscal conservatism across the public sector and economic uncertainty**

A change in government in 2023 has resulted in a swing to austerity measures following a relatively long and stable period of significant investment in public services. This reflects global trends of economic uncertainty and recession; however it also reflects a change in political ideology, with conservative neo-liberal values such as individualism and personal responsibility threatening the collective value or tūhonohono placed on public services such as social work. Government agencies have been directed to reduce expenditure, this has impacted social workers directly employed by government, and social workers in agencies funded by government contracts. As a result, there have been recruitment freezes, the loss of roles and support functions, which have culminated in higher workloads and stress. Social workers report being asked to do more and more with less under current government directives. Although workforce challenges cannot be attributed to this change in government policy direction, the environment is not conducive to the government addressing workforce shortages through financial investment during this term.

Target Measure

- Intention to leave due to workload/burnout reduces to 10%

[76] Ibid

[77] SWRB (2024) *Social Worker Employers Report 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/social-worker-employers-report-2024/?tmstv=1743378372

ACTIONS

Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions:

- **Burnout**

30. Educate organisations around burnout.	· *Advocate and/or educate organisations to address burnout as a factor that results in social workers leaving the profession:* · *Explore opportunities to partner with organisations and Unions on this.* · *Support training and education to promote understanding of burnout and how to prevent this.* · *Explore the tension between risk aversion and managerialist approaches and ethical decision-making in practice, which may contribute to disciplinary processes.*
31. Ensure social workers are receiving supervision.	· *SWRB to ensure social workers are receiving supervision as part of APC renewal and that supervision is cognisant of the relationship between identity and the practice of the supervisee.* · *Support implementation of the ANZASW supervision strategy as a sector-wide initiative to protect social workers from burnout.*
32. Support workplaces to be culturally 'safe' and mana-enhancing.	· *Scope organisational needs to enhance kaimahi safety in the workplace.* · *Promote wraparound support within workplaces.* · *Develop resources and training for social work managers on creating healthy workplace cultures within organisations.* · *Promote and support diverse forms of leadership, such as te ao Māori approaches.*

Addressing high workloads

Caseload numbers, complexity, and their relationship to social worker workload have critical implications for social work practice – they impact social worker wellbeing, staff recruitment and retention, and most importantly, quality social work practice[78] [79] [80]. For social work organisations, trying to manage vacancies and chronic underfunding exacerbates high workloads for existing social work employees. Social workers with high workloads are less able to engage in training, professional development, and professional supervision as multiple urgent demands reduce individual autonomy over scheduling and responding to non-urgent work. This increases the risk of poor practice and erodes the quality of services to clients, meaning that untenably high workloads in social work pose not only a workforce challenge but a public safety issue. This reflects systemic issues, created by the working environment and associated pressures which can unfairly lead to disciplinary processes for individual practice issues rather than correctly placing responsibility on organisation and system failures.

There is a significant body of literature examining the concept of caseload and the associated concept of workload management. A common feature of the research and professional commentary, and the associated media focus, is the urgent need to reduce social worker caseloads to support quality practice. Despite there being no universally accepted definition of a high workload in social work[81], national and local efforts should be made to develop workload management methodologies that enable safe caseloads and workloads.

Underlying drivers – addressing high workloads:

The underlying drivers for high workload mirror that of burnout, with recruitment challenges and increasing complexity of work compounding workload issues.

- **Mismatch between supply, capacity and demand**

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is largely government funded, with 53% of social workers directly employed by government organisations and a further 38% employed by NGOs or iwi-based organisations that receive government funding to operate[82]. It was estimated in 2019 that the government funding shortfall for social service providers was $630 million annually, evidencing significant historical underfunding of social work services[83]. More recently, community-based social services have seen government funding reductions of approximately $139 million[84], despite ongoing concerns about the capacity of systems, particularly our child protection system, to respond to tamariki and whānau at risk[85]. This represents a serious mismatch between demand for social work services and

[78] Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). *Caseload and workload management issue brief.* https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/case_work_management.pdf
[79] Henson, M., Cain, M. D., Wilke, D. J., & Radey, M. (2023): What makes a case difficult: Definitions from child welfare workers and implications for workload and caseload management, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2023.2219649
[80] van Berkel, R, & Knies, E. (2016). Performance management, caseloads and the frontline provision of social services. *Social Policy & Administration, 50(1)*, 59-78. https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12150
[81] Kothari, B. H., Chandler, K. D., Waugh, A., McElvaine, K. K., Jaramillo, J., & Lipscomb, S. (2021). Retention of child welfare caseworkers: The role of case severity and workplace resources. *Children and Youth Services Review, 126*, 106039. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106039
[82] SWRB (2024). *Annual social worker workforce report 2024: A high-level overview of the social worker workforce in 2024*. https://swrb.govt.nz/download/annual-social-worker-workforce-report-2024/?tmstv=1744500828
[83] MartinJenkins, (2019). *Social Service System: The Funding Gap and How to Bridge It*. https://www.sspa.org.nz/downloads/assets/4e58
[84] https://www.sspa.org.nz/news/article/community-based-social-services-on-edge-funding-cuts-threaten-children
[85] Aroturuki Tamariki Independent Children's Monitor. (2025). *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa 2023/2024.* https://aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/eoc-23-24

funding capacity to deliver. High workloads are a systemic issue, without adequate funding, organisations are unable to recruit more social workers to address increasing demand for their services, leaving the profession in a self-perpetuating cycle of mismatched supply and demand. Additionally, this mismatch is often driven by funding criteria embedded in contract reviews, which direct both staffing levels and tasks. Many social service organisations are entirely reliant on these funding contracts; therefore, organisations have limited ability to reduce caseloads without contract changes.

- **Organisations do not have workforce models to determine how many social workers are required to respond to the needs of service users.**

Data regarding demand for social workers is of poor quality as it is currently drawn from indicative conclusions from self-report surveys from the sector. SWRB's Demand for Social Workers Survey had a response rate of approximately 2%[86], yet this is currently the most comprehensive information available for forecasting workforce needs across the sector. Organisations across the sector do not currently utilise workforce models to establish demand, therefore, demand is based upon role vacancies only, without reference to whether funding for positions has been reduced (sometimes resulting in roles being combined or removed) or whether utilisation rates are unsustainably high. Without the standardised use of such models by organisations, data regarding the true demand for social workers is likely to remain incomplete and not be an accurate reflection of increasing workloads in response to reduced workforce numbers.

Target Measure

- Intention to leave due to high workload reduces to 10%

[86] SWRB, (2022). *Demand for Social Work Services Report 2022.* https://swrb.govt.nz/download/demand-for-social-work-services-report/?tmstv=1744591630

ACTIONS

Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions:

- **High Workloads**

33. Support organisations to address high workload.	· *Advocate and/or support organisations to address high workload as a factor that results in social workers leaving the profession.* · *Explore opportunities to partner with Unions on this.* · *Share learnings and initiatives across the sector.* · *Explore ways to advocate for funding criteria to become more responsive to the reality of the social services sector.*
34. Gather insights on safe and appropriate caseloads.	· *Explore whether a professional position paper on safe and appropriate caseloads would assist.*
35. Determine SWRB's position on high workloads as a potential risk to public safety.	· *Link awareness of high workloads as an issue for public safety.*
36. Develop shared workload management tools.	· *Consider a process for employers to consider what workloads are appropriate, i.e., criteria and the susceptibility to practice being risk driven and decisions of management made accordingly.*

Addressing work/life balance

The complex nature of social work practice and balancing work and personal life were the most noted barriers to entering or re-entering the social work profession. Those indicating that balancing work and personal life is a barrier has increased from 41% in 2023 to 52% in 2024, signalling a growing issue with work/life balance across the profession.

Underlying drivers- addressing work/life balance:

- **Social work is a stressful and demanding profession**

WorkSafe New Zealand recognises that social work involves stressors which make it intrinsically more difficult to navigate than other professions[87]. These stressors include high levels of emotional challenge, hostility and conflict, and high consequences for mistakes or errors made by practitioners[88]. Consequently, social workers experience higher levels of adverse outcomes such as sickness and maladaptive coping behaviour when compared to professions where these stressors are not present[89]. The nature of social work often includes role conflict, where underlying professional values and practice approaches are incongruent with the demands of the organisation and work environment[90]. This adds significant stress and impacts work/life balance as social workers try to meet role expectations whilst maintaining integrity in their practice, often investing in longer work hours to do so. These demands commonly conflict with familial obligations often at the expense of the social worker's own wellbeing. United Kingdom research found that social workers worked on average 11 hours per week beyond their contracted hours to meet the demands of their role[91].

- **Social work is a female-dominated profession**

Social work is a profession which is currently 85% female. It is well established that female-dominated professions experience lower pay and devaluation of work compared to male-dominated professions[92]. It is also well established that regardless of contribution to the job market, women experience penalties in the workplace for having family/parenting responsibilities, penalties not equally applied to men[93]. Despite the success of feminism, societal stereotypes persist, which maintain an expectation that women will reduce their hours or take leave to manage family responsibilities[94]. This directly impacts both women's ability to participate flexibly in the labour market and the wider perception of their value

[87] Department of Labour, (2003). *Healthy Work: Managing Stress and Fatigue in the Workplace.* https://worksafe.govt.nz/dmsdocument/1514-healthy-work-managing-stress-and-fatigue-in-the-workplace
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Lloyd, Chris & King, Robert & Chenoweth, Lesley. (2011). Social Work, stress and burnout: A review. *Journal of Mental Health, 11(3),* 255-265. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09638230020023642
[91] Ravalier, J. & Boichat, C. (2018). *UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing*. Bath Spa University. https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Working%20Conditions%20%20Stress%20%282018%29%20pdf.pdf
[92] Leuze, K., & Strauß, S. (2016). Why do occupations dominated by women pay less? How 'female-typical' work tasks and working-time arrangements affect the gender wage gap among higher education graduates. *Work, Employment and Society*, *30*(5), 802-820. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017015624402
[93] Parker, K. (2015). *Women more than men adjust their careers for family life.* https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/
[94] Navarro JL, Brown M, Jensen T, Weinstein M, Jensen M. It isn't just Mom: Gendered provision of family and home responsibilities among emerging adults during COVID-19. *Front Psychiatry. 15:1330424*. doi: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38463426/

and contribution. In social work, we see the impact at two levels: firstly, a higher proportion of the workforce is likely to have dual family responsibilities, which impacts work/life balance, secondly, social work is classed as ‘women’s work’ so it is less likely to be valued or invested in by wider society.

Target Measure

- Intention to leave due to work/life balance reduces to 10%

ACTIONS

Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions:

- **work/life balance**

37. Support organisations to address work/life balance.	· *Advocate and/or educate organisations on the fact that work/life balance is a factor that contributes to social workers leaving the profession.* · *Explore opportunities to partner with organisations and Unions on this.*

Addressing poor pay

Poor pay in social work is linked closely to its categorisation as a 'female-dominated profession' and the devaluation of the work associated with social work. The distribution of annual salary has shifted higher than last year, with a 'peak' category of $100,001 - $110,000 reported by 26% of social workers, compared to the peak of $80,001 – $90,000 in the 2023 survey. Salaries reported by social workers employed by health and in non-government organisations (NGOs) increased between 2023 and 2024. They now more closely match those of Oranga Tamariki at a peak of $100,001 – $110,000.

Underlying drivers – addressing poor pay:

- **Pay parity across social work**

Social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand have successfully campaigned and obtained pay equity settlements for those employed by Oranga Tamariki, government-funded NGOs and iwi providers, roughly 75% of the social work workforce. This has resulted in an approximately 30% increase in salaries for social workers in these positions and the provision of professional supports like regulatory costs, professional development and supervision. This success has been celebrated across the profession; however, it has also uncovered disparities between groups of social workers employed elsewhere. For example, social workers not employed in specific social work roles or those working outside of the social services sector, e.g. education, justice, and health have fallen behind and now face compounding recruitment challenges as they are unable to offer comparable pay.

- **Unpaid overtime is normalised in social work and social services**

Working beyond contracted hours is normalised within social work, with research suggesting that up to 92% of social workers work unpaid hours on a regular basis[95]. 50% of social workers believe it is a normal expectation to work beyond their paid hours, with nearly 30% stating their employers approve of this working pattern[96]. Social workers cite responsibilities they have to their clients and caseloads which simply can't be managed within regular work hours as the main drivers behind this behaviour[97]. In 2020 it was estimated that United Kingdom social workers were contributing £600million unpaid overtime annually[98]. Professional expectations communicated through professional regulations and standards, the use of unpaid placements in training and managerialist policies and systems compound the expectation to work beyond paid hours in social work and can subsequently devalue the profession[99]. Social workers often have mechanisms to claim overtime, yet the onus is on a worker to identify and apply for this. Power differentials become relevant here[100]; despite an expectation from employers that social workers will manage their caseloads, concerns are voiced that claiming overtime reflects poorly on practice. This power dynamic shifts the blame to the individual rather than acknowledging the system's failure.

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[95] Ravalier, J., Wainwright, E., Clabburn, O., Loon, M., & Smyth, N. (2020). Working conditions and wellbeing in UK social workers. *Journal of Social Work*, *21*(5), 1105-1123. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017320949361.

[96] Fraser, L. (2016) Invisible Hours: Social Service Work and Unpaid Labour. *Open Access Library Journal*, **3**, 1-15. doi: 10.4236/oalib.1102448.

[97] Ibid,

[98] BASW. (2020). *UK Social workers are working more than £600 million of unpaid overtime*. https://basw.co.uk/articles/uk-social-workers-are-working-more-ps600-million-unpaid-overtime-0

[99] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/08861099231185331

- **Devaluation of social work**

Social work as a profession evolved from movements and organisations traditionally positioned within unpaid charity work, led by pioneering women who professionalised this work and brought it into the public sphere[101]. Despite professionalisation, this persistent label as 'women's work' is still reflected in workforce demographics. Gender pay gaps remain an issue in Aotearoa New Zealand, with Pākeha women earning on average 89 cents to every $1 earned by Pākeha men, for Māori women, this drops to 81 cents[102]. Gender inequalities in pay impact social work at two levels, firstly, social workers tend to experience lower pay rates compared to male-dominated professions who require similar levels of skill and education[103], secondly, male social workers are over-represented in higher paid social work positions[104]. Additionally, the public perception of what social work involves impacts upon the perceived value of the profession. SWRB research found that public trust in social work in Aotearoa New Zealand was not high, and there are very low levels of understanding about what social workers do[105]. Public scrutiny of social workers in the media also reinforces a negative stereotype of the work whilst successes remain unnoticed[106]. This public devaluation of social work is likely to result in tangible consequences such as lower funding levels and lower pay[107].

Target Measure

- Intention to leave due to poor pay reduces to 10%

[100] Cui, H. (2019). *The Unreasonable Silence on Reasonable Overtime.* Equal Justice Project. https://www.equaljusticeproject.co.nz/articles/the-unreasonable-silence-on-reasonable-overtime2019
[101] Dahle, R. (2012). Social Work: A history of gender and class in the profession. *Ephemera 12(3),* 309- 326. https://ephemerajournal.org/contribution/social-work-history-gender-and-class-profession
[102] https://www.mindthegap.nz/
[103] University of Washington. (n.d). *School of Social Work study confirms humand services workers are underpaid*. https://socialwork.uw.edu/news/school-social-work-study-confirms-human-services-workers-are-underpaid/
[104] Hicks, S. (2015). Social Work and gender: An argument for practical accounts. *Qual Soc Work. 2015 Jul;14(4):471-487*. doi: 10.1177/1473325014558665.
[105] SWRB. (n.d). *Public Trust in the social work profession*. https://swrb.govt.nz/exploring-public-trust-and-confidence-in-the-social-work-profession/#:~:text=Last%20year%2C%20the%20SWRB%20commissioned,work%20profession%20was%20not%20high.
[106] MacDonald, M. (2025). *Social Work Success is Invisible, but Failure is Public.* https://www.mysocialworknews.com/article/social-work-success-is-invisible-but-failure-is-public
[107] Mare, D. (2022). *Pay gaps – an $18 billion a year issue.* Motu Research Note #45. Motu.

ACTIONS

Promote retention of current social work workforce by addressing workplace conditions:

- **Addressing poor pay**

38. Ensure pay agreements reflect the contribution social workers make to wider societal outcomes.	· *Ensure that new pay negotiations under collective agreements reflect skills and expertise social work offers.* · *Ensure collective pay agreements remain in step with wage increases.* · *Encourage organisations outside of collective pay agreements or the pay equity settlement to match market rates of pay.*
39. Investigate and promote pay parity for all social workers.	· *Address pay parity for social work educators.* · *Investigate the impact and extent of coverage of various pay parity settlements.* · *Identify insights for future pay settlements by exploring the challenges in implementing the NGO and iwi pay equity settlement.* · *Address pay parity for social workers outside of the scope of the community and iwi pay equity settlement, ie. education, defence, corrections, health.*

Strategic Priority 8

Improve digital capability and prepare for a future-orientated, technologically enabled profession

Improve digital capability and prepare for a future-orientated, technologically enabled profession

The problem

Technology, including the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work practice is developing at pace globally. Social work, and similar professions, are already applying emerging technology such as machine learning and generative AI in client interactions and organisational systems to efficiently support clinical tasks and reduce administrative burden[108].

Improving digital capabilities for social work here in Aotearoa New Zealand consequently offers an opportunity to address several workforce challenges such as workloads, administrative burden, and risk management. However, ethical considerations around the application of technology solutions for social work need to be carefully considered, including ensuring Māori data sovereignty[109] as determined by Māori. Consistency in application is needed across the sector to ensure neither social work values, nor our client base are compromised through the widespread adoption of emerging technology.

Underlying drivers

- **Client management systems are increasingly outdated**

The Abuse in Care Inquiry and Aroturuki Tamariki have highlighted shortcomings in information technology infrastructure within the care and protection system, survivors reported difficulties accessing their own care records and, in some cases, care records were found to not comply with legal requirements around case recording[110]. Social workers have regularly reported issues with CYRUS, the client management system used within Oranga Tamariki, which is considered outdated and no longer fit for purpose[111]. The government committed to funding a systems upgrade over four years for Oranga Tamariki in the 2024 Budget[112]. This is an acknowledgement that fit for purpose, user-friendly case management systems are essential to delivering quality social work services and upholding legal record-keeping requirements; however, it requires ongoing and significant government investment.

[108] Reamer, F. (2023). Artificial Intelligence in Social Work: Emerging Ethical Issues. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 20(2), 52-71. https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-205.
[109] "**Māori Data Sovereignty** recognises that Māori data should be subject to Māori governance. Māori data sovereignty supports tribal sovereignty and the realisation of Maori and Iwi aspirations." https://www.temanararaunga.maori.nz/
[110] Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care. (2024). *Whanaketia: Through pain and trauma, from darkness to light.* https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/reports/from-redress-to-puretumu/from-redress-to-puretumu-4/1-1-introduction-12/1-1-introduction-4
Aroturuki Tamariki. (2024). *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa: 2023-2024*. Aroturuki Tamariki | Independent Children's Monitor.
[111] Cabinet Paper, 2024 https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/about-us/information-releases/cabinet-papers/technology-upgrade-to-improve-outcomes-for-children-and-families/
[112] https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/about-us/information-releases/cabinet-papers/technology-upgrade-to-improve-outcomes-for-children-and-families/

- **Social investment approaches rely on data and analytics for funding decisions**

Social investment has remained the dominant approach to the allocation of resources across public services since it was introduced by the National-led government during their 2009-2017 term[113]. Despite the change to a Labour-led government in 2017, this investment approach remained in principle, but was renamed 'social wellbeing' with a broader focus on wider impacts for people[114]. What is evident is that despite a difference in terminology across the political spectrum, the use of data and evidence to understand needs in the allocation and delivery of social services is now a fundamental feature of Aotearoa New Zealand's public service. Therefore, for social services agencies to remain relevant within the contracting environment, technology systems that are capable of capturing, analysing, integrating and anonymising client data will be increasingly necessary.

- **Artificial intelligence is increasingly being integrated into organisational systems and client interactions**

Increasingly, artificial intelligence is being integrated into practice settings to support an array of clinical functions. Machine learning can analyse data and identify patterns related to client risk, social needs, crisis points and even worker burnout within workforces[115]. Generative AI can support both administrative functions such as case noting and report writing, as well as provide therapeutic tools through chatbots and apps that respond to human emotions and needs by providing evidence-based resources and responses[116]. Such practice integration is largely occurring without oversight or regulation, therefore, there is a need to upskill the social work workforce and improve technology literacy, particularly around the application of AI, to ensure client data is protected and the risk of unsafe practice is mitigated. Some high-level guidance is available, both internationally[117] and locally[118] within the SWRB Code of Conduct, however, further work is needed to address the specific risks and opportunities AI presents to social work.

Target measure

- Social workers report that their administrative burden has been reduced over the past year because of use of technology.

[113] O'Brien, M. (2020). Social Investment in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Meaning and Implications. *Social Sciences, 9(7),* **https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9070111**
[114] Ibid.
[115] Reamer, F. (2023). Artificial Intelligence in Social Work: Emerging Ethical Issues. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 20(2), 52-71. https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-205
[116] Reamer, F. (2023). Artificial Intelligence in Social Work: Emerging Ethical Issues. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 20(2), 52-71. https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-205.
[117] NASW, ASWB, CSWE & CSWA. (2017). *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice.* https://www.socialworkers.org/Practice/NASW-Practice-Standards-Guidelines/Standards-for-Technology-in-Social-Work-Practice#:~:text=As%20with%20in%2Dperson%20advocacy,or%20coerce%20individuals%20or%20groups.
BASW. (2025). *Statement on Social Work and Generative Artificial Intelligence*. https://basw.co.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/181372%20Statement%20on%20Social%20Work%20and%20Generative%20Artificial%20Intelligence.pdf
[118] SWRB. Code of Conduct.

ACTIONS

Improve digital capability and prepare for a future-orientated, technologically enabled profession

40. Explore opportunities to enhance use of technology in social work practice and systems that are user-friendly and fit for purpose.	· *Scope how opportunities to enhance efficiencies can maintain Māori data sovereignty and social work ethics.*
41. Explore the risks and benefits of AI in practice and whether guidance or regulation is necessary to ensure public safety.	· *Support research exploring how AI is currently used in practice in Aotearoa New Zealand.* · *Identify risks associated with unregulated use of AI in practice.* · *Explore benefits AI can offer to social work.* · *Determine whether guidance or regulation is needed and develop and regularly update this.*
42. Support social workers to obtain and enhance technology literacy in the workplace.	· *Explore the learning needs of social workers in relation to technology literacy, including differing needs of different workforce groups.* · *Explore professional development or integration into social work programmes to address literacy gaps.* · *Support social workers to understand and uphold Māori data sovereignty as determined by Māori.* · *Gather information around social workers' use of technology via the SWRB workforce survey.*

The pathway forward

A significant proportion of Aotearoa New Zealanders are currently experiencing unprecedented hardship. Social workers are uniquely educated and qualified, many with life experience, to support tamariki, rangatahi and their whānau and communities to meet some of life's biggest challenges within the context of the ongoing impacts of colonisation and global economic and social trends.

The Social Work Alliance is compelled by the commitment that through collective effort and strategic planning, we can navigate a united pathway that allows us to address the real pressures and challenges that our workforce faces. The values of rangatiratanga, tiakitanga and tūhonohono become very real in the execution of this commitment.

The position paper identifies 8 key strategic priorities and associated actions that will cohesively make a tangible difference to our workforce. However, they are by no means an exhaustive list, or the only way to move forward. As a reference point, they are intended to invite both the social work sector, and relevant stakeholders, to engage with both the issues and the opportunities.

The pathway forward does require everyone to play their respective role in supporting social work workforce planning, development and retention. It also requires workforce planning to meaningfully incorporate addressing wider social indicators that may help to reduce demand. Only then, will we see tangible improvements that will stabilise and strengthen our profession, ensuring that social workers can continue to provide essential services to the communities we serve.

Mā te whiritahi, ka whakatutuki ai ngā pūmanawa ā tāngata

Together weaving the realisation of potential

The Social Work Alliance

2025