



**Social Workers
Registration Board**
Kāhui Whakamana Tauwhiro

Sustainable Social Work Pathways – Tauwhiro Ararau

Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan 2026–2036

Strategy and Action Plan

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New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

About the Strategy name - Tauwhiro Ararau

Tauwhiro Ararau is grounded in He Arapaki, the Social Workers Registration Board's Māori Development Strategy foundational approach to Māori Development. It is also aligned with our organisational whakataukī:

He ara pūkenga. He ara tauwhiro.
Hei whakamana mātā waka.

The many pathways of knowledge.
The many pathways of social work.
Upholding the dignity of all.

In an ever-changing social landscape, Tauwhiro Ararau is a Māori expression of kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga, and a direct expression of He Arapaki.

Tauwhiro personifies care, generosity, and kindness. In this context Tauwhiro – Social Workers support whānau to move from a place of darkness to a place of light, a place of ill health to a better quality of life, from vulnerability to self-autonomy.

Ararau speaks to the many pathways of support offered by social workers. Creating a sustainable workforce will ensure better outcomes are achievable.

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The vision is for

A sustainable, skilled and valued social worker workforce, helping individuals, whānau and communities navigate life's challenges.

Minister's foreword

All New Zealanders deserve to live safe and fulfilling lives. Social workers play a critical role in helping individuals, whānau and communities navigate life's challenges, providing support during some of the most complex and difficult circumstances people face.

Our government is focused on ensuring New Zealanders can access effective support from services when they need it. We know that outcomes are better when people receive help early, before challenges become more complex and greater intervention is required. Social Workers are central to that effort.

Yet, we know that social workers are facing significant challenges. Demand for services is increasing, the needs of communities are becoming more complex, and employers across the system are competing for a limited workforce. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, long-term approach.

This is why I directed the development of Aotearoa New Zealand's first Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan, Sustainable Social Work Pathways – Tauwhiro Ararau. The Strategy sets a clear direction for building a workforce that is sufficient, qualified, and supported to meet the changing needs of New Zealanders now and into the future.

The Strategy provides a shared pathway for government agencies, educators, employers, professional bodies, iwi and Māori providers, and the wider social work sector to work together to realise this shared goal. It focuses

on strengthening workforce capacity, growing capability, and creating conditions that will support social workers to build long and rewarding careers. I expect the resulting actions of the Strategy to drive improved services and outcomes for New Zealanders through better working conditions and fulfilling careers for more social workers.

Achieving the vision of this strategy will require a collective effort. By working together, we can strengthen the profession, improve recruitment and retention, and ensure social workers are supported to deliver high-quality services for our people and communities who need them.

My sincere thanks to everyone who contributed to the development of this strategy and most importantly to the social workers across New Zealand whose essential work supports our communities, often in challenging circumstances.

I look forward to seeing this first strategy in action and the positive impact it will have on the future of the social work profession and the wellbeing of all New Zealanders.

Hon Louise Upston

*Minister for Social Development
and Employment*

Chair of the Board's foreword

Social work sits at the heart of how Aotearoa New Zealand supports people, whānau and communities through complex and difficult moments. Social workers help people navigate systems, protect those at risk, uphold dignity and mana, and connect people with the support they need.

As Chair of the Social Workers Registration Board, I am delighted to share the first national Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan, Sustainable Social Work Pathways – Tauwhiro Ararau.

I acknowledge the skill, judgement and commitment social workers bring across statutory services, health, justice, education, mental health and addiction, family violence, disability, older persons' services, community organisations, iwi and Māori providers, and many other settings.

That value is why workforce challenges must be addressed with urgency and purpose. New Zealand does not have enough social workers to meet demand, and the gap is growing. Too few people are entering and completing pathways into the profession, parts of the workforce are ageing, demand is rising, and responsibility is spread across many organisations. These are system challenges requiring a system response.

This Strategy sets that response over a ten-year horizon, supporting action now while building the conditions for a sustainable, skilled and valued social worker workforce.

It builds on work already underway across government, the regulator, education agencies, employers and the wider sector to strengthen pathways, promote social work as a career, support students, streamline overseas registration, improve supervision and leadership pathways, and strengthen workforce data.

The Strategy's success will also depend on purposeful engagement with NGOs, iwi and Māori providers, community organisations, professional bodies, educators and employers, whose knowledge and reach must help shape future delivery.

This Strategy is both a plan and an invitation. By working together over the next decade, government and the wider sector can strengthen the pipeline into social work, support people to grow and lead, and build a workforce ready to meet the needs of individuals, whānau and communities now and in the future.

Mike Munnelly RSW

Chair Social Workers Registration Board

About the Strategy

Sustainable Social Work Pathways – Tauwhiro Ararau: Social Worker Workforce Strategy and Action Plan is the first cross-government workforce strategy for New Zealand's social worker workforce. It provides a shared, long-term direction for strengthening the profession's capacity, capability and sustainability over the next ten years.

The Strategy serves as a framework for a collective response, built on a shared understanding of workforce challenges and the actions needed to address them. It identifies shared priorities, outcomes and areas of focus while recognising that different agencies have different responsibilities and levers for change.

The Action Plan establishes the delivery responsibilities for agencies that have committed to action. Each agency remains accountable for implementing its own initiatives and programmes and for contributing to the broader goals of the Strategy.

- Why the Strategy is needed and who owns it
- Initial focus
- Workforce Lifecycle
- How this Strategy is structured
- Developing the Strategy



Why the Strategy is needed and who owns it

The current workforce sustainability challenges social workers face need to be addressed effectively. Addressing the sustainability challenges facing the social work workforce requires a coordinated and sustained response. Lasting progress will depend on clear ownership of workforce challenges and collective action across the sector. The Strategy provides an opportunity for the initial cross-government-agency focus to prepare for a changing future, reduce administrative burden, and improve practices around data ethics and protection. Technology, including artificial intelligence, is already being used in social work practice both administratively and clinically, from case noting and reporting through to identifying patterns of client risk. The Strategy can support building the workforce's capability to use these tools safely as practice continues to evolve.

The Strategy is owned by the Social Workers Registration Board, Kāhui Whakamana Tauwhiro (SWRB). Cabinet has designated SWRB as the lead agency for workforce planning for all social workers, in response to fragmented leadership across more than 600 employers and the absence of strategic oversight of social worker supply and demand. As part of this mandate, SWRB is expected to develop and periodically refresh a workforce strategy and action plan, as well as report on progress against the Strategy. SWRB's role is to coordinate, provide evidence and lead workforce planning at the system level; responsibility for individual employees remains with individual employer.

Initial focus

Evidence shows that attraction and recruitment, and retention and wellbeing, need to be urgently addressed to ensure a sustainable, skilled social worker workforce that meets forecast demand. On attraction and recruitment, this Strategy's analysis of the workforce lifecycle shows that enrolments into social work qualifications have been declining, and the number of social workers entering the profession each year continues to fall short of what's needed to meet demand, with this gap widening.

On retention, SWRB Annual Social Worker Workforce Reports consistently identify this as one of the two most urgent areas of need: more than 40 percent of social workers intending to leave the profession cite burn out, poor work-life balance, high workloads or low pay, and an estimated 304 social workers could be lost to burnout alone over the next five years. The Strategy therefore focuses initial attention on these two priority areas of the workforce lifecycle, while continuing to monitor the whole lifecycle.

Workforce Lifecycle



Figure 1: Workforce Lifecycle showing key focus areas

How the Strategy is structured

The Strategy is structured as an integrated framework that translates long-term ambition into focused action.

- The Vision sets the aspirational future state the Strategy is working to achieve.
- Strategic Goals define the major outcomes required to move toward achieving the Vision.
- Principles establish the non-negotiable values and decision rules that guide how these goals are pursued.
- Action Pillars identify the critical focus areas where resources and leadership attention will be concentrated to deliver the goals.
- Enablers describe the foundational capabilities, systems, and conditions that must be in place for the Action Pillars to succeed.

Together, these elements create a clear line of sight from purpose to execution, ensuring coherence, accountability, and disciplined delivery across the system.

Developing the Strategy

The Strategy is based on a consistent and growing body of evidence over several years¹ and it was developed through engagement with social workers, employers, iwi and Māori organisations, government agencies, professional bodies, education providers and sector representatives. Feedback was gathered through surveys, workshops, interviews and targeted engagement activities.

Participants consistently identified workforce attraction, recruitment, retention, wellbeing, career pathways, supervision, better co-ordinated workforce planning and professional recognition as key priorities. These themes have informed the vision, strategic priorities and actions set out in this Strategy.

While the Strategy has been developed with input from across the social work system and is intended to support the entire social worker workforce, the initial Action Plan focuses on commitments from government agencies. This reflects a deliberate decision to establish a practical foundation for implementation by identifying actions that agencies can formally commit to, resource and report against in the short term.

Alongside the initial focus on efforts from government agencies and enhanced coordination between them, this is a purposefully staged approach. Success in this first stage, including better coordination across the government agencies that commission and fund community providers, will lay the foundation for the Strategy's full potential to be realised – through purposeful and productive engagement with the wider social work system. Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) including iwi and Māori providers, Pacific providers, community organisations, professional bodies, education providers and other employers are central to the lives of many communities and to the day-to-day reality of social work practice. A co-ordinated approach across the system will be needed if this Strategy is to achieve its potential into the future.

¹ The first workforce surveys began in 2018 and grew into a consistent format from 2020/2021 onwards <https://swrb.govt.nz/workforce/workforce-reports/>



The case for this Strategy and Action Plan

Social workers strengthen individual, whānau and community wellbeing, but the workforce faces growing demand, declining supply and a fragmented system. The Strategy provides a shared direction for building a sustainable, responsive workforce.

- Social worker workforce context
- The social worker workforce today
- The value of the social worker workforce
- A challenge of a fragmented system

Social worker workforce context

Social workers assess needs, strengths and risks, and make decisions that can have lasting consequences for individuals, whānau and communities. In some settings, they also exercise statutory powers on behalf of the state.

As a registered profession, social work operates where people's lives intersect with the systems intended to support them. Practitioners work across statutory services, health, education, justice, iwi and Māori providers, Pacific providers, and community organisations. They help people navigate complex systems, protect those at risk, strengthen resilience, and connect individuals and whānau with appropriate support. Their practice is grounded in professional expertise, human rights, social justice, cultural responsiveness, and a commitment to wellbeing.

The profession frequently involves working alongside people experiencing poverty, trauma, discrimination, violence, mental distress, or other significant challenges, often in situations where involvement has not been sought or chosen. This requires practitioners to exercise professional judgement, apply legal and ethical frameworks, navigate complexity and uncertainty, and build effective relationships across diverse cultures, communities and circumstances. These capabilities are developed through professional education, ongoing development, supervision, and experience.

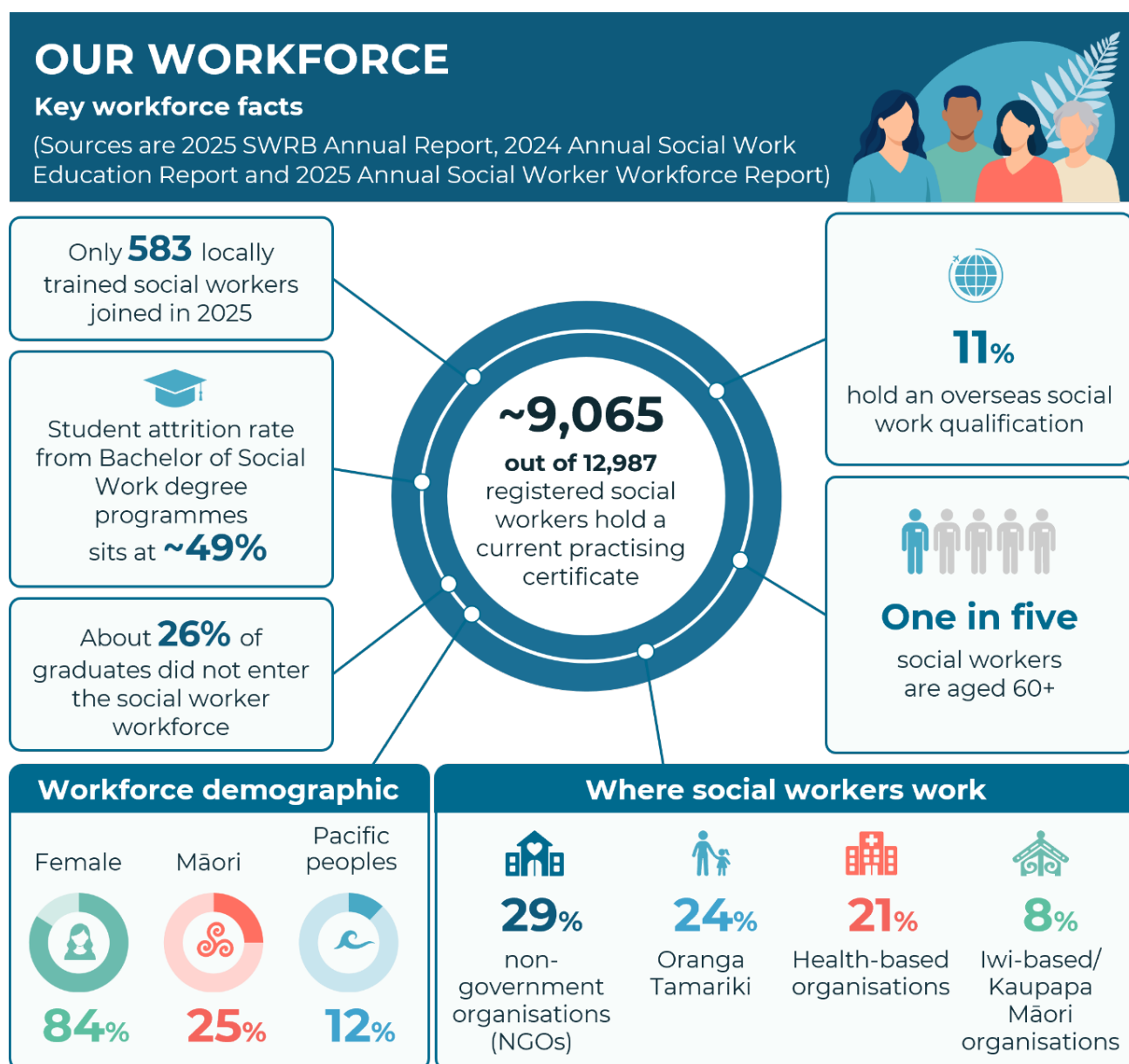
The social worker workforce today

The diagram below shows that there is a significant sustainability issue for the social worker workforce, with pressure at both the entry and exit points of the workforce lifecycle. In part, this is due to substantial attrition between attracting people onto a social work degree programme and entering the workforce. At the same time, an ageing workforce approaching retirement puts pressure on the continuity of the workforce. As a result, the number of social workers joining the profession annually is likely to continue to fall short of the number required with this gap widening.

This pressure is reinforced by structural barriers within the education system. Social work programmes are funded at a lower Equivalent Full-Time Student rate than other professional programmes, which reduces providers' incentive to market them. At the same time, and for reasons that extend beyond funding alone, the number of enrolments continues to decline. Alternative pathways into the profession are limited with the two-year Master of Social Work the only conversion pathway for graduates of related degrees.

Organising unfunded fieldwork placements for social work students adds further strain, with challenges around supervisor capacity, candidate readiness, placement quality, matching, and administrative burden.

Additionally, while the social worker workforce is more representative of the communities it serves than many other caring professions, its demographics do not yet fully match the needs of those communities. It remains a very female-dominated profession, its age profile does not align well with growing demand for mental health, drug and addiction services for young people, and its ethnic make-up is not yet fully representative. Together, these gaps limit how well the workforce can reflect and respond to the people it serves.



The value of the social worker workforce

Social work creates value for individuals, whānau, communities and wider society. Through assessment, intervention, advocacy and support, social workers help people achieve better outcomes, reduce harm, strengthen resilience and maintain connections with their communities. In doing so, they support those experiencing vulnerability, disadvantage or complex needs to improve their wellbeing and participate more fully in society.

The contribution of social workers extends beyond direct support to individuals and whānau. As a profession, social work strengthens the effectiveness of many essential services in New Zealand, including health, education, justice, child protection, defence and emergency response. By addressing the social, behavioural and environmental factors that influence wellbeing, social workers help other professionals and services achieve better outcomes and respond more effectively to complex needs.

Social work also contributes to the sustainability of public services. Effective early intervention, prevention and support can reduce demand on more intensive services over time, including healthcare, corrections, welfare and crisis responses. This generates both social and economic benefits through improved outcomes, reduced long-term costs and stronger community wellbeing.

Evidence from New Zealand and internationally demonstrates that investment in social work can deliver significant social and economic returns, including improved health and education outcomes, reduced offending and family harm, stronger workforce participation, and reduced demand on public services. The benefits extend beyond the individuals and whānau directly supported, contributing to broader social cohesion, community resilience and economic wellbeing.

Evidence shows:

- New Zealand Productivity Commission (2015): well-implemented social work programmes produced cost savings of approximately NZ\$3–5 for every dollar invested, primarily through reduced downstream costs in healthcare, corrections and social welfare.²

² New Zealand Productivity Commission (2015) - "More Effective Social Services" report evaluated social work interventions across New Zealand

- Oranga Tamariki (2020): investment in early-intervention social work programmes produced significant cost savings across multiple government agencies.³
- Barnardo's LEAP Service, evaluated by Impact Lab (2021): every dollar invested delivered \$18.01 of measurable good.⁴
- International evidence: the presence of social workers in a community has a positive impact on downstream outcomes, including crime rates, health statistics, school attendance and employment.^{5 6 7 8}

The challenge of a fragmented system

The social worker workforce exists within a highly dispersed system, both in terms of education and employment. This includes:

- An education pipeline that spans five agencies: the Ministry of Education, the Tertiary Education Commission, the Education, Health, and Community Industry Skills Board (ISB), New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), and over 20 Tertiary Education Organisations delivering SWRB prescribed social work programmes, covering education policy, funding, quality assurance, and pathways into social work education.
- The need for provision and support of workforce planning across all social workers to overcome the fragmentation in leadership across over 600 employers, most of which are NGO providers. Most social workers are employed in the public sector, either directly by government agencies or indirectly through government-funded contracts including with iwi and Māori providers, and Pacific providers.

Compounding this, the boundary between health and social services is becoming less distinct, with social workers increasingly working across both systems. This fragmentation makes it difficult to take a consistent, system-wide approach to addressing workforce pressures and needs.

³ Oranga Tamariki (2020) - Early Intervention - A synthesis of recent research and evaluations

⁴ Impact Lab Good Measure Report (2021) - Barnardos LEAP service

⁵ Allen, G. (2011). Early Intervention: The Next Steps. HM Government UK. This report details how social workers are positioned as key professionals in effective early intervention systems.

⁶ Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2019) benefit-cost analyses showing significant ROI for early intervention programs involving social workers.

⁷ Karoly, L. A. (2017). The economic returns to early childhood education. *The Future of Children*, 27(1), 37-55.

⁸ Waldfogel, J. (2009). Prevention and the child protection system. *The Future of Children*, 19(2), 195-210.

At the same time, demand on the workforce continues to grow. An ageing population, more complex needs, and a shift toward community-based service delivery are all increasing demand for social workers. Natural disasters are also becoming more frequent, and these events, along with pandemics, drive sudden spikes in demand that place additional pressure on an already stretched workforce.

Together, a dispersed system and rising, unpredictable demand mean that no single agency or employer can address these workforce pressures alone. The Strategy sets a shared direction for addressing these pressures across the system.

Our direction to 2036

The Strategy sets out the direction for the social worker workforce for the next ten years (2026–2036). The different elements of the Strategy are Vision, Strategic Goals, Principles, Action Pillars and Enablers.

- Vision
- Strategic goals
- Principles
- Action pillars
- Pillar 1: Capacity
- Pillar 2: Capability
- Pillar 3: Sustainability
- Enablers
- Monitoring and reporting



STRATEGY ON A PAGE



ACTION PILLARS



Capacity

Enough social workers, in the right place, at the right time.



Capability

Social workers have the right skills, knowledge and competencies to effectively support individuals, whānau and communities facing life's challenges.



Sustainability

Social workers practise in workplaces that are safe, sustainable and supportive.

KEY ENABLERS

Conditions for change that need to be in place for the strategy to succeed.



Establishing system stewardship



Strengthening system workforce data



Enhancing workforce planning

Vision

A sustainable, skilled and valued social worker workforce, helping individuals, whānau and communities navigate life's challenges.

This means:

Sustainable

The workforce grows and retains enough social workers to meet demand across New Zealand. Social workers are deployed to the right place, at the right time, so individuals, whānau and communities can access support when they need it.

Skilled

Social workers build and maintain the right skills, knowledge and competencies to practise safely and competently, so individuals, whānau and communities receive high-quality support.

Valued

Social workers are trusted and respected by the individuals, whānau, and communities they serve. Social work is a highly regarded, rewarding career that people choose to join and remain in. Its positive image strengthens the profession's ability to attract, recruit and retain social workers.

Helping individuals, whānau and communities navigate life's challenges

Social workers help individuals, whānau and communities navigate life's challenges, and protect them from harm. They connect people to the right support in the right place, at the right time, helping them work towards healthier, better lives.

Strategic goals

The following key strategic goals support progress towards the Strategy's vision:

A workforce that reflects and responds to the communities' social workers serve

A representative workforce supports more responsive, attuned practice, which helps ensure individuals, whānau and communities experience safe practice aligned with their needs. This Strategy enables employers to grow the workforce's existing strength in reflecting the communities it serves, and to extend this strength to communities more broadly.

A connected, capable and coordinated workforce system

At a systems level, the Strategy aims to support a more cohesive workforce, where effectiveness and value come from how well the workforce connects and shares good practice, not from individual practitioners working in isolation. Connection supports the exchange of ideas and practice, enabling the discipline to grow. It creates the conditions for communities of practice and more agile service delivery.

Improved wellbeing for individuals, whānau and communities

By social workers supporting individuals, whānau and communities to navigate life's challenges, the profession contributes to improved wellbeing for these groups. This includes Māori and Pacific Island peoples, people with disabilities, refugee and migrant communities, older people, and rural communities.

Together, these three strategic goals create the conditions for the social worker workforce to be respected and valued.

Principles

The strategic goals define what the Strategy aims to achieve. The four principles underpin the Strategy, defining how the system needs to work together to deliver it.

Evidence-informed decision making

Data will be used to inform decisions, measure progress and will enable the sector to be transparent about what works and what does not. As no single entity holds a complete picture of the social worker workforce government agencies, non-government providers, iwi and Māori providers, Pacific providers, community organisations, education providers and professional bodies will need to contribute to establishing a national picture.

Realising the workforce's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The social worker workforce is committed to honouring the relationship between Māori and the Crown under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This commitment is reflected in the social work Code of Conduct, core competence standards, and the Strategy's focus on a sustainable, skilled and valued workforce for New Zealand.

Successful implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan will advance this commitment by enabling better outcomes for tangata whenua, including Māori social workers and the Māori individuals and whānau receiving social work services.

The Pillars and Foundational Actions of the Strategy and Action Plan provide the basis for improved workforce planning by agencies and the promotion of better practices across the system. It is expected that this planning will be undertaken, implemented, and monitored in a manner that considers the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Professional excellence and public trust

Professional standards protect the public and maintain the integrity and competence of the social worker workforce. Regulatory requirements, ethical frameworks and continuing professional development ensure practitioners are competent to meet complex practice demands. This principle encompasses both regulatory accountability and the development of a strong professional identity that sustains practitioners throughout their careers and maintains public confidence.

Shared responsibility

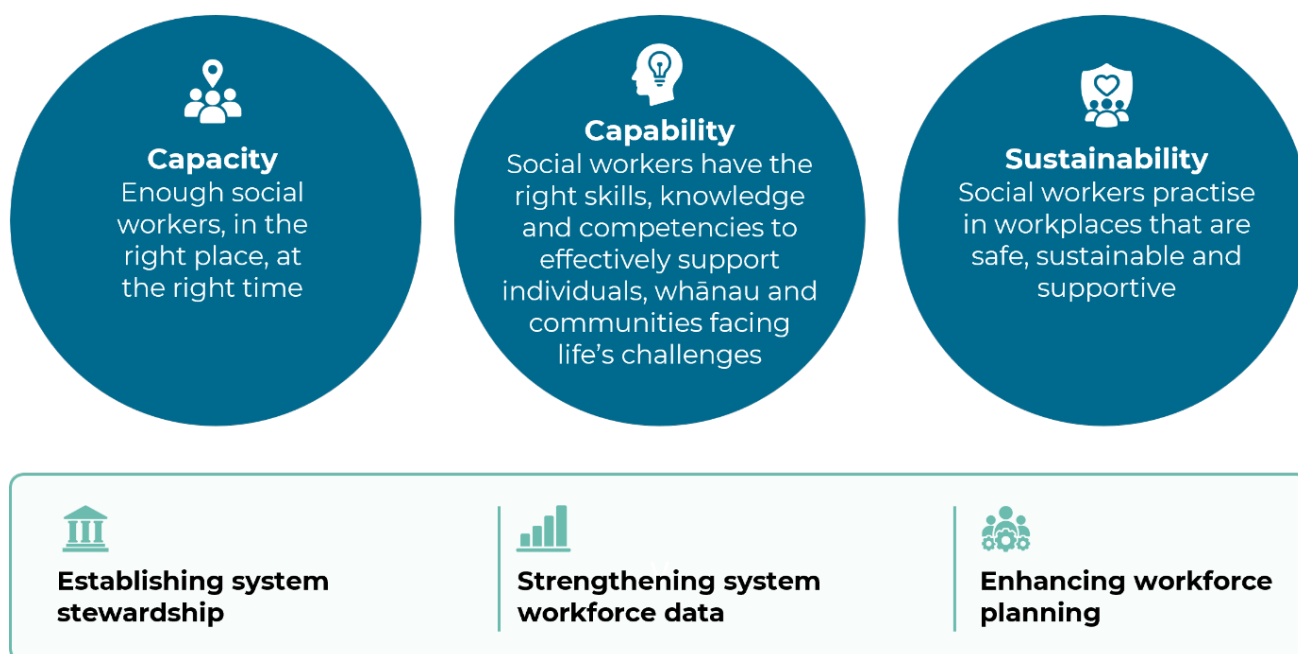
Achieving a sustainable social worker workforce depends on government agencies, non-government providers including iwi and Māori providers, Pacific providers, education providers and professional bodies all playing their part. The Strategy sets a shared

direction rather than fixed actions. As part of its coordination role, SWRB will make visible progress against the high-level goals of the Strategy and report in one place on progress of action-owning Agencies against their existing actions.

Action pillars

The three action pillars identify the priority outcomes and areas needed to achieve the vision of a sustainable, skilled and valued social worker workforce, helping individuals, whānau and communities navigate life's challenges.

These pillars are supported by a set of system enablers which involve foundational, system-level actions that provide the coordination, evidence and planning capability needed to implement the Strategy successfully. Some enablers are essential to achieving the outcomes, while others affect how well those outcomes are achieved. Developing some of these enablers will itself be a significant undertaking.



Pillar 1: Capacity

Outcome: Enough social workers, in the right place, at the right time

An accurate understanding of current and future workforce demand established through effective use of data, forecasting and workforce planning will inform decisions on capacity across the sector. Meeting demand will require a productive supply pipeline, that includes the promotion of social work as an attractive and visible career option, and the conversion of that interest into students who enrol and complete their studies. This will require education to be more accessible, including through flexible entry pathways, that recognise

prior learning, mātauranga Māori expertise, reduced financial barriers, and sufficient training capacity in the education sector. It also requires support for a more representative workforce, including males, Māori, Pacific peoples and rural students. Capacity can also grow by re-engaging non-practising registrants and increasing agreements to encourage further overseas registration through mutual recognition where appropriate.

What needs to be done

- Refine and further develop workforce demand modelling that estimates future social worker need, to inform tertiary training capacity and funding decisions.
- Increase the visibility of social work as a career option for school leavers through schools-based programmes and career navigation tools.
- Identify barriers to enrolment, retention and completion in social work education, broaden entry pathways into education, and prioritise tertiary investment toward more flexible training delivery models.
- Conduct targeted promotion to attract underrepresented groups, such as males, Māori, Pacific peoples and rural students, into social work education.
- Build an evidence base on non-practising registrants and develop targeted supports to re-engage them back into practice.
- Enhance and streamline the overseas application process for overseas qualified social workers.

Key indicators of success

- Increased number of students graduating from a social work degree programme and becoming registered.
- Increased number of non-practising registrants who return to active practice.
- Increased number of overseas-qualified social workers who register to practise in New Zealand.
- Increased representation of males, Māori, Pacific, rural, and other underrepresented groups in the workforce, measured against the demographics of the communities and clients' social workers serve.
- Reduced amount of time that each social worker vacancy takes to fill.



Pillar 2: Capability

Outcome: Social workers have the right skills, knowledge and competencies to support individuals, whānau, and communities facing life's challenges.

Building a skilled and confident workforce requires strong induction and structured support through the first two years of practice, covering provisional registration through to full registration. Ongoing professional development sustains capability over time. This is achieved by supporting practising certificate renewal against clear professional standards and expectations, including cultural competence, and by disseminating consistent, up-to-date practice resources to equip practitioners and employers. Career progression frameworks spanning entry through to retirement help retain skills within the sector at key transition points, alongside leadership development that draws on experienced practitioners. Readiness for the future includes improving digital and AI capability, including its safe and ethical use, and appropriate consideration of the implications for Māori data sovereignty, as the workforce adapts to these changing tools and expectations.

What needs to be done

- Strengthen induction and structured support for social workers in their first two years of practice, aligned to SWRB supervision requirements.
- Set clear professional practice standards and keep guidance resources current for practitioners and employers.
- Establish and implement a social work profession specific career progression framework covering the full career span, supported by guides that help social workers plan their careers independent of employer.
- Create opportunities for experienced practitioners to lead and develop others in the profession.
- Ensure alignment between all areas of work that support building a safer workforce, through capability lifting and strengthened safety checks.
- Research safe and ethical AI use in social work practice, and integrate digital and technology literacy into professional development, with careful attention to the implications of Māori data sovereignty.

Key indicators of success

- Improved rates of retention of social workers within their first two years of provisional registration.
- Reduced number of social workers citing lack of career progression as a reason for leaving the profession.
- Increased number of social workers progressing into advanced roles.
- Leadership positions within the social work workforce reflect the diversity of the communities and clients' social workers serve.
- AI use in social work practice researched, and findings used to inform professional development content on technology and digital literacy.



Pillar 3: Sustainability

Outcome: Social workers practise in workplaces that are safe, sustainable and supportive.

Creating sustainable working conditions will encourage and enable greater levels of workforce retention. This requires exploring workload and demand pressures across the sector. It will involve building a consistent, system-wide understanding of what constitutes a sustainable workload and recognising the additional workload that arises from lived experience, cultural knowledge, or holding multiple roles in rural areas. Regular access to supervision, with supervisor capability and capacity assessed against an agreed standard, allows tailoring to the emotional demands of practice, and supports retention and safe, effective practice across the workforce. Alongside this, workplaces need to be professional and supportive, valuing and respecting the workforce's expertise. This also requires better representation of underrepresented groups in leadership and decision-making positions.

What needs to be done

- Explore workload and demand pressures across the profession to build a consistent understanding of what constitutes a sustainable workload.
- Recognise the additional workload that arises from lived experience, cultural knowledge, or holding multiple roles in rural areas.
- Ensure regular access to supervision, with supervisor capability and capacity assessed against an agreed standard, tailored to the emotional demands of practice.
- Foster professional and supportive workplaces where social workers' expertise is valued and respected.

- Promote improved representation of underrepresented groups in leadership positions.

Key indicators of success

- Reduced number of social workers reporting an intention to leave due to burnout or workload.
- Increased number of social workers reporting recognition of additional workload from lived experience, cultural knowledge, or multiple rural roles achieved.
- Increased number of social workers reporting improved access to regular supervision.
- Increased number of leaders who identify with underrepresented groups.
- Increased number of social workers reporting their workplace as professional and supportive.

Enablers

Enablers are the foundational actions that will create the conditions for the successful implementation of this Strategy. They are essential for addressing workforce pressures that cannot be resolved by a single agency or employer alone. Three enablers have been identified: establishing system stewardship, strengthening system workforce data, and enhancing workforce planning. These are interrelated, with establishing system stewardship the pivotal starting point.

Establishing system stewardship, through providing the mechanisms for coordination and oversight in relation to the Strategy, supports the efficacy of the other two enablers.

SWRB, as Strategy owner, will drive delivery of the enablers, which will be a key focus for implementing the Strategy in the first year.

Establishing system stewardship

This involves leadership, establishing coordination and oversight mechanisms and evidence-based advice on system-level issues across the social worker workforce in relation to the Strategy. This includes providing system-wide

leadership on shared cross-government agency priorities, establishing coordinating mechanisms to explore appropriate cross-government-agency and employer actions, and monitoring how the Strategy is progressing. As the co-ordinating mechanism for overseeing

implementation of the Strategy, system stewardship also provides direction for workforce planning across the system, ensuring individual agency planning efforts align with overall strategy priorities. This stewardship establishes the co-ordinating mechanisms for strengthening system workforce data and enhancing workforce planning to be effective. Without system-wide stewardship, individual agency actions risk progressing in isolation, without visibility of what others are doing, or of where the Action Plan itself has gaps.

Strengthening system workforce data

This will play a crucial role in coordinated, cross-agency delivery of this Strategy. This includes supporting effective, coordinated workforce planning, monitoring progress, and identifying what, if any, adjustments to actions are needed to ensure New Zealand has a sustainable, skilled social worker workforce. SWRB already plays a lead role in collecting and publishing workforce data, including through existing data sharing with Health New Zealand and the Tertiary Education Commission. Building on this, a fuller system-wide evidence base is needed. Developing this shared data infrastructure will be a significant undertaking, potentially requiring legislative change. Without it, progress

against the Strategy, across agencies, cannot be measured with confidence.

Enhancing workforce planning

This requires a cross-agency approach to ensure it is cohesive, efficient and effective. This spans the full scope of workforce planning: ensuring enough people enter and complete social work qualifications, having sufficient social worker numbers to meet demand across the country, and ensuring the workforce is representative of the communities it serves. It includes ensuring funding and policy settings support entry and completion of social work qualifications, responding when providers signal that training is no longer viable to deliver, or when enrolment and completion data point to a problem. Delivering on this will involve, at different points in time, contributions and information from government agencies, education providers, professional bodies and sector organisations, supporting rather than directing agencies' own workforce planning activities. Without a shared approach, workforce planning may not reflect system-wide need.

Monitoring and reporting results

Monitoring and reporting are essential to ensuring transparency, accountability, and informed decision making. It supports the Minister, SWRB as lead agency, participating agencies, the social worker workforce, and the communities' social workers serve to see how progress is tracking. Monitoring reveals emerging issues, risks and opportunities early enough to inform adjustments to the implementation where needed. Reporting shows what has been delivered and the results achieved.

As owner and steward of the Strategy, SWRB is responsible for monitoring and reporting progress against the strategic outcomes, including the development and monitoring of the reporting framework. Where challenges arise that need a cross-agency response, SWRB will identify this and take a lead coordination role.

SWRB's reporting on the Strategy will occur:

- Quarterly, as part of SWRB's existing reporting to the Minister for Social Development and Employment, including updates on progress against the Strategy.
- Annually, to the Minister and as agreed to the Child and Youth Ministers group.
- Annually, through the publication of an Annual Progress Report.

To inform its reporting SWRB will need agencies to provide information on what has been delivered and what has changed as a result. This information should be tailored to the commitments of each agency, indicate the delivery status against the expected timeframe, and be drawn from existing evidence sources where appropriate.

While quarterly and annual reporting on delivery captures implementation activity, an outcomes framework is needed to assess the extent to which the Strategy is achieving its intended impact. The Strategy seeks to improve outcomes for individuals, whānau and communities, and an outcomes framework provides a structured approach to measuring and reporting progress towards these longer-term objectives.

SWRB will lead the development of an integrated Outcomes and Reporting Framework by June 2027. The framework will bring together the links between actions and short, medium and long-term outcomes with the indicators and measures that track progress against the three Action Pillars. Once developed, this framework becomes the basis for the Annual Progress Report and for assessing the Strategy's impact over the longer term.



Action Plan

The first Action Plan combines foundation actions with agency initiatives already underway. Together, these establish system stewardship, strengthen workforce data and planning, and coordinate action across attraction, recruitment, retention and wellbeing.

- Scope
- From direction to delivery
- Foundation actions
- Agency work already underway

Scope of the Action Plan

This Action Plan sets out the actions that government agencies are taking to strengthen the social worker workforce. While the social worker workforce spans government and non-government employers throughout their careers, social workers share common qualifications, professional standards, and often the same career pathways regardless of who employs them.

Government agencies have a significant role in shaping these system settings and, through coordinated action, can strengthen the conditions that support recruitment, development and retention across the wider profession.

The Action Plan focuses on cross-government-agency led actions and system stewardship. It does not direct the activities of non-government employers but is intended to create a stronger workforce system that benefits all parts of the profession.

From direction to delivery

The Strategy sets the direction for the social worker workforce; however, direction alone does not deliver change. Deliberate immediate system-level action is needed to ensure the progress made by government agencies is coherent and efficient. This Action Plan gives effect to the Strategy through two connected parts.

- Foundation actions are the system-level changes – led primarily by SWRB – that build the conditions and mechanisms to support coordinated action: establishing system stewardship, shared workforce data, and cross-government-agency workforce planning.
- Agency Actions are the practical work already underway across government agencies, organised under the Strategy's three pillars; Capacity, Capability and Sustainability and grouped into themes that reflect the two key focus areas of the workforce lifecycle.

Together, the two parts show both the new, system-level work the Strategy calls for and the work already in train that it builds on.

Foundation actions

Foundation actions are the initial system-level changes upon which successful implementation of the Strategy depends. They will be a key focus for the first year and are intended to establish the conditions needed for coordinated action across government agencies. While the foundation actions are interrelated, they are set out below in a sequential order that reflects how progress in one area enables progress in the next. For example, establishing co-ordination mechanisms to build system stewardship provides the leadership and coordination needed to strengthen workforce data, and together these create the evidence base required for effective workforce planning.

Actions to establish the mechanisms to build system stewardship	Lead Agency	Delivery
SWRB will work with agencies to: - establish the engagement and co-ordination mechanism - map current actions against the three pillars; Capacity, Capability and Sustainability. - identify where there are gaps (no actions) or overlaps (duplicated actions). - use this analysis to better align, connect and focus agency actions, and support agencies to coordinate their efforts. - support any agency group (established as part of the engagement and coordination mechanism) to consider future social worker workforce planning activities into out years.	SWRB supported by Ministry of Social Development	By March 2027
Develop the associated monitoring and reporting framework that provides the basis for regular reporting on progress towards achieving the strategic goals and vision.	SWRB	By March 2027
Develop an outcomes framework that establishes the short-medium- and long-term outcomes and associated measures, as detailed in the Strategy.	SWRB	By June 2027

Establish coordination and oversight for cross-government agency workforce planning, identifying any operational barriers identified through the gap analysis.	SWRB supported by Ministry of Social Development	By June 2027
Develop Year 2 and Year 3 actions informed by gap analysis, workforce data and monitoring findings.	SWRB	October 2027 onwards
Early indicators: By the end of the first year, a cross-government-agency coordination mechanism will be established and operating, the gap analysis will be completed, and it will be informing agencies' social worker workforce planning approach including for Year 2 and Year 3 actions.		
Actions to strengthen system-wide workforce data	Lead Agency	Delivery
Map the existing workforce data, identify gaps, and test where improvements can be made to data accuracy and alignment between agencies.	SWRB supported by Health New Zealand, Tertiary Education Commission, Ministry of Education	By March 2027
Explore options for improved sharing of data between agencies, to support monitoring and reporting.	SWRB	By June 2027
Early indicators: By the end of the first year, a workforce data stocktake will be completed with key data gaps and opportunities to improve data sharing and gap filling identified.		
Actions to enhance coordinated cross government agency workforce planning	Lead Agency	Delivery
Identify gaps in the current sharing of data on enrolment, registration and completion of social work degree qualifications, and establish what if any reforms may be needed.	SWRB supported by Ministry of Social Development	By October 2027
Early indicators: By the end of the first year, an options paper on a cross-government agency workforce planning framework, developed in partnership with Ministry of Social Development, and advice on what will be required to build a baseline workforce supply and demand model, will be completed.		

Agency work already under way

While the Foundation Actions focus on building system capability, agencies are already undertaking a range of initiatives that contribute directly to the Strategy's three pillars. The Foundation Actions will help connect, coordinate and monitor this work against a shared, system-wide understanding of workforce need and progress. As the gap analysis and cross-government-agency workforce planning approach matures, this set of actions is expected to grow into a more comprehensive Year Two and Year Three Action Plan.

The agency actions are aligned to the Strategy's pillars and grouped into two cross-cutting priority areas (which reflect the Workforce Lifecycle). Together, they will provide a shared system-wide picture, through a unified mechanism to test, sequence and report in one place, on the progress individual agencies are making towards their actions.

Priority 1: Attraction and Recruitment (primarily supporting Capacity)

Increasing the supply of social workers into the workforce. This includes:

- increasing the visibility of social work as a career, including through a national promotional campaign
- supporting entry and qualification pathways into SWRB prescribed social work degree programmes
- reducing financial barriers for students and supporting student completion
- improving the efficiency of the overseas registration process
- re-engaging non-practising registrants
- supporting a sustainable education sector.

Priority 2: Retention and Wellbeing (primarily supporting Capability and Sustainability)

Ensuring qualified, experienced, skilled social workers are kept within the workforce. This covers:

- treating burnout as structural rather than individual
- supervision as a baseline expectation
- visible career pathways, workplaces where cultural expertise is recognised
- conditions that reflect the complexity of the work
- digital and AI capability.

The Appendix details the work underway as described by agencies. The actions are grouped by pillar, across 11 themes as follows:

Capacity

These actions focus on growing the pipeline into the profession: attracting people to social work as a career, supporting entry and qualification pathways, and building the tertiary training capacity needed to meet demand. The themes are:

1. Careers promotion and visibility
2. Student enrolment and success
3. Programme delivery and standards
4. Registration and workforce entry pathways

Capability

These actions focus on developing social workers once they are in the workforce: induction, career and leadership pathways, professional standards, and the specialist skills needed across different practice settings. The themes are:

5. Career development and pathways
6. Practice standards and professional support
7. Safety and practice quality
8. Alignment with wider safety context
9. Induction and early career support

Sustainability

These actions focus on the conditions social workers work within including supervision, workload, and workplace settings that support retention and wellbeing. The themes are:

10. Supervision, workload and workplace settings
11. Workforce visibility and re-engagement.

Appendix: Agency actions

Read together with the Foundation Actions above, this appendix completes the picture of the Strategy's first year of delivery: the system-level changes being built, and the practical work already underway that they will connect, coordinate and monitor. This appendix sets out an overview of work already underway across government agencies that contributes to the social worker workforce, as agencies have described it.

Individually, these activities respond to specific, agency-level challenges; collectively, they build the pipeline into the profession, support social workers once they are in the workforce, and sustain the conditions they practise in. They are organised under the Strategy's three pillars (Capacity, Capability, Sustainability) and grouped into themes that reflect the key stages of the workforce planning lifecycle, from attraction through to retention. These descriptions sit apart from the Action Plan's Foundation Actions, which set out the new, system-level work the Strategy calls for. Together, the two parts show both what is being built and what is already underway.



Capacity - Enough social workers, in the right place, at the right time

Theme 1: Careers promotion and visibility

A larger workforce begins with more people considering social work as a career. These actions aim to increase awareness of the profession among school students, career changers and former practitioners, improve understanding of available pathways into practice, and strengthen the visibility of social work's value to communities. Over time, this should contribute to increased interest in social work education and a stronger pipeline into the profession. These actions relate to Priority Area 1 – Attraction and Recruitment.

Action	Responsible Agency
Prioritise local-market attraction activity – including promoting the value of Oranga Tamariki social work and visibility of the Allied Support Worker pathway. Other opportunities such as attracting alumni and international recruitment pathways may also be explored.	Oranga Tamariki
Identify a former kaimahi willing to front an alumni return campaign, encouraging former staff to return to practice.	Oranga Tamariki
Attract people into allied health careers, including social work, through its broader, ongoing attraction activity across health professions, rather than a standalone social-work-specific campaign.	Health New Zealand
Support the Inspiring the Future programme, with social workers registered as role models, and will work with SWRB on outreach to identify role models willing to attend events.	Tertiary Education Commission
Maintain up-to-date careers information on the Tahatū Career Navigator, including the newly launched Pathfinder tool mapping school subjects and pathways into social work.	Tertiary Education Commission

Theme 2: Student enrolment and success

Awareness alone does not increase workforce supply unless people can successfully enter, complete and transition from education into practice. These actions focus on reducing barriers to participation, strengthening student support, ensuring training remains viable and accessible, and improving transitions into employment. Together, they aim to increase the number of students who enrol in, complete and enter the profession through accredited social work qualifications. These actions relate to Priority Area 1 – Attraction and Recruitment

Action	Responsible Agency
Support the Allied Support Worker role, including as a potential pathway from student placement into Social Worker employment, with recruitment ongoing across sites.	Oranga Tamariki
Signal social work as a tertiary investment priority, and will preferentially fund new, SWRB-accredited three-year social work degrees from 2027, while continuing to fund the four-year degree during the transition.	Tertiary Education Commission
Hold a sector-wide view, inclusive of Health New Zealand, to ensure workforce planning keeps sight of the whole sector.	Ministry of Health
Investigate the factors affecting student participation and success in social work education and training, and identify options to increase enrolment, retention, completion, and transition into the workforce. This includes assessing financial sustainability for students, strengthening supervision and field education placement quality and capacity, barriers in priority areas (including regional and rural locations and among under-represented population groups), and reviewing qualification requirements and alternative pathways.	Ministry of Social Development

Theme 3: Programme delivery and standards

Enrolling more students only helps if the programmes they enter are well designed and able to flex to different learners and delivery models. These actions focus on shaping how social work qualifications are structured and delivered; through funding policy settings, engagement with training providers, and standards that allow programmes to vary in length and format. Together, they aim to keep social work education relevant, deliverable, and responsive to workforce need. These actions related to Priority Area 1 – Attraction and Recruitment.

Action	Responsible Agency
Engage with the tertiary education organisations that educate social workers and other allied health professions. This is the channel to explore any potential to streamline programmes in line with requirements mandated by the relevant regulator.	Health New Zealand
Administer the tertiary education vote and advises the Minister on policy settings for social work programmes.	Ministry of Education
Implement and monitor the impact of its revised Education Standards, which allow greater flexibility in social work programme length and componentry.	Social Workers Registration Board

Theme 4: Registration and workforce entry pathways

Not every new social worker comes through a New Zealand qualification. Some arrive already trained and registered overseas. This action focuses on making it faster and simpler for suitably qualified people to register and start practising in New Zealand. Over time, this should widen the pool of registered social workers without compromising the standards the profession requires. These actions related to Priority Area 1 – Attraction and Recruitment.

Action	Responsible Agency
Streamline its overseas registration pathway, including exploring options for a limited FastTrack approach.	Social Workers Registration Board

Capability: Social workers have the right skills, knowledge and competencies to support individuals and whānau

Theme 5: Career development and pathways

Keeping skilled social workers in the profession depends on them being able to see a future in it. These actions focus on building clearer career and leadership pathways; through structured leadership and supervision programmes, career and capability frameworks, and policy work on career progression more broadly. Together, they aim to give experienced social workers visible ways to grow their practice and stay in the workforce. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Deliver and refine the Leaders in Practice programme and the Kaitiakitanga Postgraduate Supervision programme as core, leadership development pathways. Oranga Tamariki will concurrently grow elective learning opportunities aimed for more experienced kaimahi.	Oranga Tamariki
Complete a 10-year Workforce Strategy (year one commitment), with a capability framework to follow as an implementation action in the outyears.	Oranga Tamariki
Scope the development of a mental health and addiction capability and competency framework. This scoping will explore whether a social-work-specific framework or a broader capability and competency framework for the specialist mental health and addiction sector would be most useful and suitable.	Health New Zealand
Maintain the Allied Health Career Framework as a management tool describing indicative allied health roles and step levels and will clarify how social workers sit within it.	Health New Zealand
Make Te Awa Tārai – a career development guide for allied health / Hauora Haumi – available to help social workers alongside other allied health professionals plan their careers regardless of employer.	Ministry of Health

Action	Responsible Agency
Assess options to develop a clearer career structure for social work and potential policy and operational responses to career progression and retention.	Ministry of Social Development and Social Workers Registration Board

Theme 6: Practice standards and professional support

Consistent, well-supported practice keeps social workers confident and effective in demanding work. These actions focus on the standards and resources that underpin day-to-day practice; quality assuring the qualifications social workers hold, sharing practical guidance with practitioners and employers, and exploring stronger training and supervision standards. Together, they aim to ensure practice quality keeps pace as the workforce grows. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Assure the quality of new social work degree programmes and monitor provider performance against approval and accreditation requirements, working with SWRB as an approval-panel partner under their existing Memorandum of Understanding.	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
Build from its existing social work practice resources by continuing their dissemination to support social work practitioners and employers.	Social Workers Registration Board
Explore how the development of training standards supports professional practice, competence standards and supervision.	Social Workers Registration Board

Theme 7: Safety and practice quality

Some social workers take on responsibilities that would otherwise sit with another profession, and the settings that allow this need to be safe and well governed. These actions focus on the frameworks that accredit suitably experienced social workers for extended roles, and on reviewing the legislation that underpins the profession's regulation. Together, they aim to ensure social workers can safely practise at the edges of their scope, within a regulatory framework fit for purpose. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Operate the national Responsible Clinician framework assessing non-medical staff, including senior social workers, for accreditation to undertake certain roles under the Mental Health Act that would otherwise require a doctor.	Health New Zealand

Theme 8: Alignment with wider safety context

This theme is about coordination rather than new work: making sure the Strategy's safety-related work lines up with the other major reviews already underway across government. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Analyse recommendations in the Social Work Registration Act 2025 review, with any appropriate legislative changes agreed, then drafted and agreed by SWRB, Ministry of Social Development and the Minister for Social Development.	Ministry of Social Development
Ensure alignment between other areas of work underway that support building a safer workforce through capability lift and strengthened safety checking. This includes the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, responding to the Dame Karen Poutasi Report, the Oranga Tamariki System Action Plan, the Child and Youth Strategy, Te Aorerekura and the review of Part 3 of the Children's Act.	Ministry of Social Development

Theme 9: Induction and early-career support

The first years of practice shape whether a new social worker stays in the profession. This action focuses on structured induction support for social workers and Allied Support Workers as they begin their careers. Over time, this should help more new practitioners settle into practice with confidence, rather than leaving in the early years. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Deliver the Puāwai Practice Induction Programme for social workers and maintains induction support for Allied Support Workers.	Oranga Tamariki

Sustainability: Social workers practise in workplaces that are safe, sustainable and mana-enhancing

Theme 10: Supervision, workload and workplace settings

Quality supervision and manageable workloads are what make day-to-day practice sustainable, once the early induction period is over. These actions focus on strengthening supervision capability and capacity at priority sites, and on assessing extended post-qualification support through the second year-of-practice pilots. Together, they aim to build workplace settings that support social workers to stay in practice for the long term. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Strengthen supervision capability and capacity – currently focused on 13 priority sites – as part of a broader focus on retention-supporting workforce settings, including workload and technology.	Oranga Tamariki
Assess the outcome of the second year-of-practice pilots across five sites, providing more comprehensive post-NESP supervision, mentoring and support, including for social workers, and consider future continuation or expansion.	Health New Zealand

Theme 11: Workforce visibility and re-engagement

Not every qualified social worker is currently practising, and the public doesn't always know who is. These actions focus on understanding why people step away from registration and what might bring them back, as well as making it easier for the public to know who is a regulated social worker. Together, they aim to make better use of the workforce that already exists, alongside growing it through new entrants. These actions relate to Priority Area 2 – Retention and Wellbeing.

Action	Responsible Agency
Build the evidence base on the non-practising workforce, including why people declare themselves non-practising and the barriers to returning to practice.	Social Workers Registration Board

Action	Responsible Agency
Explore through its 'Are They Registered' function how to support public visibility of both regulated social workers and non-registered social work like roles.	Social Workers Registration Board
Explore working in partnership with peak and professional bodies as information gatherers.	Social Workers Registration Board

Other participating agencies

Alongside the agencies delivering specific actions, other agencies have contributed to the Strategy's development and agreed to contribute to the Social Worker Workforce Action Plan as a participating organisation, engaging where relevant and appropriate. These agencies are not delivering a discrete action, but their ongoing input, expertise and touchpoints with the social worker workforce remain a valued part of delivering the Strategy. The agencies in this category are the New Zealand Defence Force and the Department of Corrections.

Whakapā mai

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