



UK Government

Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England Government Response

July 2026



UK Government

Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England Government Response

**Presented to Parliament pursuant to
Section 64 of the Children and Social
Work Act 2017**



© Crown copyright 2026

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at: www.gov.uk/official-documents.

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at www.gov.uk/contact-dfe.

ISBN 978-1-5286-6729-6

E03644200 07/26

Printed on paper containing 40% recycled fibre content minimum

Printed in the UK by HH Associates Ltd. on behalf of the Controller of His Majesty's Stationery Office

Foreword	6
Executive summary	8
Introduction	10
Fitness to practise and public protection	11
Core regulatory focus, leadership and sponsorship	13
Standards, education and professional development	15
Data, equalities and transparency	17
Response to individual recommendations	18
<i>Recommendation 1: standards framework</i>	18
<i>Recommendation 2: Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours and the Education and Training Standards</i>	18
<i>Recommendation 3: standardised route to qualification as a practice educator</i>	18
<i>Recommendation 4: continuing professional development requirements</i>	19
<i>Recommendation 5: student behaviour and reporting fitness to practise concerns</i>	19
<i>Recommendation 6: standards architecture and longer-term Social Work England role</i>	19
<i>Recommendation 7: annotation</i>	20
<i>Recommendation 8: fitness to practise improvement plan</i>	20
<i>Recommendation 9: fitness to practise legislative package</i>	21
<i>Recommendation 10: referral pathways</i>	22
<i>Recommendation 11: communications strategy</i>	22
<i>Recommendation 12: fitness to practise equalities and employer action</i>	22
<i>Recommendation 13: fitness to practise equalities research and evaluation</i>	23
<i>Recommendation 14: Social Work England's remit and core functions</i>	23
<i>Recommendation 15: Board succession and social work expertise</i>	24
<i>Recommendation 16: Professional Standards Authority information power</i>	24
<i>Recommendation 17: employer standards</i>	24
<i>Recommendation 18: data collection, governance and validation</i>	25
<i>Recommendation 19: data collection and analysis of fitness to practise</i>	25
<i>Recommendation 20: sponsorship and joint oversight</i>	25
<i>Recommendation 21: funding certainty and risk tolerance framework</i>	26
Next Steps	27

Foreword

Social workers play a vital role in supporting children, families and adults, often in complex and challenging circumstances. Effective professional regulation is essential to public protection, public confidence and the maintenance of proper professional standards.

The Government welcomes Dame Annie Hudson's Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England and is grateful to Dame Annie, the review team and all those who contributed evidence and insight. The review provides an important opportunity to strengthen the regulation of social work in England and to ensure that Social Work England is focused on delivering its core regulatory functions effectively.

The Government accepts the review's central conclusion that sustained improvement is needed. In particular, urgent and sustained action is required to improve fitness to practise performance and restore confidence in this core public protection function. The review also highlights the need for greater clarity about Social Work England's role and remit; stronger leadership, governance and sponsorship; and a more coherent standards landscape across professional regulation, qualifying education and professional development. These themes are central to public protection and public confidence.

The Government recognises that this is a shared improvement agenda. Social Work England has a central role in delivering effective regulation of the profession, but the review also makes clear that Government must play its part. That includes setting clearer expectations for the regulator, strengthening sponsorship and accountability, supporting better coherence across standards and professional development, considering where changes to rules, regulations or legislation may be needed, and working with employers and sector partners to clarify their role in supporting effective regulation.

The Government recognises the progress Social Work England has made since its establishment, including maintaining the register, developing its regulatory approach and standards, completing its first inspections, progressing equalities work, and developing approaches to early resolution of concerns. The review nevertheless identifies areas where further improvement is needed, particularly in fitness to practise, clarity of role, standards coherence, data and transparency.

The Government accepts that we, and Social Work England, need to take action on the basis of these recommendations. In our response we set out the initial steps we plan to take to address Dame Annie's recommendations, as well as areas where further work and consultation will be needed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Josh MacAlister'.

Josh MacAlister OBE MP
Minister for Children and Families

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Stephen Kinnock'.

Stephen Kinnock MP
Minister of State for Care

Executive summary

This response sets out how the Government will take forward the findings of the Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England. The Government accepts the review's central case for reform: Social Work England must be able to command public, professional and sector confidence through strong performance in its core regulatory functions, clear accountability, proportionate regulation and coherent professional standards.

The response is structured around four priorities.

First, strengthening fitness to practise and public protection. Fitness to practise is Social Work England's core public protection function and the most urgent operational priority identified by the review. The Government expects Social Work England to deliver, within six months, an externally supported, end-to-end fitness to practise strategic improvement plan, building on work already underway and bringing existing plans together into a single coherent approach. This should include clear milestones, revised forecasts and KPIs on timeliness, methods to track progress, delivery expectations and strengthened oversight. The plan must improve timeliness, communication, user experience, employer engagement and confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of the fitness to practise process. If Social Work England does not meet this six-month deadline, or if reporting shows insufficient progress against the plan, the Government will escalate intervention, including through governance, sponsorship and statutory levers available to the Secretary of State.

Second, clarifying Social Work England's role, leadership and sponsorship. The Government agrees that Social Work England should remain clearly focused on its core regulatory functions. Its data and insight can support effective regulation, including better understanding of regulatory risk, performance and outcomes, but its role must remain distinct from professional representation, advocacy or wider sector improvement activity. DfE and DHSC will strengthen joint working and senior engagement so that sponsorship supports effective challenge, accountability, and timely escalation where needed.

Third, building a clearer standards and professional development landscape. The Government agrees that the current landscape of standards, frameworks and guidance is too crowded and needs to be more coherent. Social workers, employers, education providers and the public should be able to understand how different expectations fit together, what status they have, and how they support safe, effective and consistent practice across children's and adults' social work. DfE and DHSC will work with Social Work England and relevant sector bodies to develop a clearer overarching standards framework. Where the review recommends longer-term changes to post-qualifying standards and assurance, the Government will consider the appropriate route, timing and deliverability, including policy, legal, funding and capacity implications. The Government

agrees this should not distract from Social Work England's existing core regulatory responsibilities.

Fourth, improving data, transparency and equalities. The Government agrees that better data is essential to effective regulation and public confidence. Social Work England should improve the quality, completeness and use of its data, including in relation to fitness to practise and equalities. This should support greater transparency on disproportionality, differential outcomes, proportionality in regulatory decision-making, and how bias and assumptions are identified and addressed by Social Work England, employers and others.

Some recommendations can be progressed through immediate action by Social Work England or Government. Others will require consultation, further policy development, engagement with social workers, employers and education providers, funding decisions, or changes to rules, regulations or legislation. The Government will take forward implementation in a way that is practical, proportionate and focused on sustained improvement.

Introduction

On 5 November 2025, the Secretary of State for Education commissioned Dame Annie Hudson to undertake the statutory independent review of the operation of Part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (the review). This Government response is organised around four priorities:

1. strengthening fitness to practise and public protection;
2. clarifying Social Work England's role, leadership and sponsorship;
3. building a clearer standards and professional development landscape;
4. improving data, transparency and equalities.

The final section provides the Government's response to each recommendation.

Fitness to practise and public protection

Fitness to practise is the most significant operational priority identified by the review. It is central to public protection and public confidence. Delays and poor communication affect everyone involved in the process: people who raise concerns, social workers under investigation, witnesses, employers and the wider public. The Government agrees that improvement must now be visible, timely and sustained.

The Government recognises that Social Work England has already undertaken work to improve parts of the fitness to practise process, including work on triage, investigations and hearings backlogs. The Professional Standards Authority has also recognised action being taken to improve performance. However, the review makes clear that further action is needed to provide assurance across the end-to-end process and to strengthen confidence in the timeliness, fairness and effectiveness of fitness to practise.

The Government expects Social Work England to deliver, within six months, an externally supported, end-to-end fitness to practise strategic improvement plan. This should build on work already underway and bring together existing evidence, current improvement activity and external challenge into a single coherent plan, with clear milestones, revised forecasts and KPIs on timeliness, methods to track progress and delivery expectations.

The plan should address the end-to-end business process, capability and resourcing, performance management, timeliness, triage and investigation, case handovers, hearings capacity, legal services, communications, employer engagement, equalities impacts and the evidence needed to improve confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of the process. It should enable Social Work England and Government to track progress, and Social Work England to recalibrate at pace where needed.

Government will strengthen oversight of this work through sponsorship arrangements, regular reporting and senior engagement with Social Work England. If Social Work England does not meet the six-month deadline, or if reporting shows insufficient progress against the plan, the Government will escalate intervention, including through governance, sponsorship and statutory levers available to the Secretary of State.

The Government also agrees that communication throughout the fitness to practise process must improve. Social Work England should ensure that registrants, complainants, witnesses, employers and referrers receive clearer, more regular and more compassionate communication. Employers should understand what is expected of them, when information is required, and how referral thresholds are applied.

The review also recommends changes that may support a more effective fitness to practise process, including changes relating to the lawful sharing and use of relevant information from private family court proceedings, accepted disposal powers, the role of the Professional Standards Authority, information sharing, suspension and any further changes identified through the fitness to practise strategic improvement plan. The

Government accepts in principle that legislative and procedural changes may be needed and will consider the appropriate route and timing, including where proposals require cross-government engagement or future Parliamentary clearance.

The Government will also work with the Professional Standards Authority, Social Work England and relevant regulators to consider referral pathways, including whether further changes are needed where other routes, such as local complaints processes, have not been exhausted. Any changes must continue to support public protection and public confidence while ensuring that fitness to practise processes are focused on matters that properly require regulatory action.

Core regulatory focus, leadership and sponsorship

The Government agrees that Social Work England's role should be clearly focused on core regulatory functions. Regulation, professional representation, advocacy and wider sector improvement are distinct functions. Social Work England's primary role is to protect the public by setting initial education and training standards and approving training courses, setting professional standards, maintaining a register of all social workers in England, and taking action where fitness to practise concerns require regulatory intervention.

A clear focus on core regulation does not mean that Social Work England should withdraw from proportionate engagement, communications, research, data, co-production or equalities activity where these support its regulatory objectives. These activities can be important to effective modern regulation, including helping social workers, employers, education providers and the public understand the role of the regulator. Further, Social Work England's unique position and data can help inform effective regulation, including understanding regulatory risk, performance and outcomes.

However, Social Work England's role should remain distinct from professional representation or wider sector improvement activity. The Government does not currently intend to give Social Work England a broader improvement role.

The Government will work with Social Work England to clarify this role through the appropriate governance and sponsorship mechanisms, including the Framework Document and/or Memorandum of Understanding where appropriate. The Government will support Social Work England to work with the PSA and other regulators, including the healthcare professional regulators, to share and adopt best practice, and will consider whether any of the regulatory changes being implemented for the healthcare professional regulators through the Government's regulatory reform programme could be implemented for Social Work England.

Strong leadership, effective challenge, governance, and clear accountability will be essential to securing improvement. The Government agrees that future appointments and succession planning should support a Board with the right breadth of expertise, including expertise in change management, regulation, fitness to practise, finance delivery and social work. The Department for Education, as the sponsor Department for Social Work England, will lead consideration of how these expectations should be reflected, including through future appointments, governance documentation and sponsorship arrangements.

The Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care will also strengthen joint working and senior engagement in relation to Social Work England sponsorship, including appropriate joint ministerial oversight. This should ensure that sponsorship reflects both children's and adults' social work and provides the right level of

support as well as clear accountability, effective challenge and timely escalation where required.

Standards, education and professional development

The Government agrees that the standards landscape for social work should be more coherent. The current landscape includes standards, frameworks and guidance with different status, ownership and authority. This can make it harder for social workers, employers, education providers and the public to understand what is expected and how different frameworks relate to one another.

The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care will work with Social Work England and relevant sector bodies to develop an overarching framework that clarifies the purpose and status of different standards, frameworks and guidance. This work should reduce duplication, support clearer expectations and ensure that the system works across both children's and adults' social work.

Social Work England is reviewing the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours as part of its work to revise the Education and Training Standards. The Government agrees that this work should clarify how the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours support assessment in practice placements and should help provide clearer expectations for initial qualifying education. Further iteration will need to be carefully sequenced with Social Work England's standards and inspection cycles, provider lead-in time and any procedural requirements, including consultation and any necessary approvals.

The Government also supports further work on practice education. Practice placements and practice educators are central to strong qualifying education and preparation for practice. Social Work England should consult on a standardised route to qualification as a practice educator, and Government will work with Social Work England, employers, education providers and sector bodies to consider the best route to strengthen practice education while managing capacity, burden and deliverability.

The Government accepts in principle the need for a clearer profession-wide architecture for post-qualifying standards and development. This should clarify progression pathways, associated learning and development, and the standards that underpin practice across children's and adults' social work. DfE and DHSC will work with Social Work England and partners to consider how this should be taken forward, building on existing reforms and recognising different starting points across children's and adults' services.

The Government also notes the review's longer-term proposal that Social Work England could have a role in setting and assuring post-qualifying education and training standards. We agree that this should not be taken forward at this point in time. Any extension of Social Work England's role would require further policy, legal, funding and delivery work, and would need to be carefully sequenced with Social Work England's existing core regulatory responsibilities and the immediate priority to improve fitness to practise.

The Government agrees that registration and continuing professional development should be proportionate, meaningful and focused on professional practice. We support Social

Work England reviewing the current CPD model, including whether CPD assurance should move to a longer cycle, how moderation could be strengthened and the model can better assess impact on professional practice.

The Government recognises that annual fee collection, core registration data, confirmation of fitness to practise and register accuracy raise separate legal and operational considerations. Further work will therefore be needed before any changes are made to registration processes beyond the CPD model.

The Government also agrees that annotation should be clearer and more accurate, particularly where it relates to statutory roles. We will consider the appropriate changes needed to clarify expectations on annotated registrants, including requirements to notify Social Work England of relevant changes in status. This work will need to align with wider policy on statutory roles and any future changes to the annotation framework.

The review also highlights the important role of employers in supporting high-quality placements, practice education, continuing professional development, appropriate fitness to practise referrals and information sharing. The Government agrees that employer roles and expectations should be clearer, but further work is needed with Social Work England, the Local Government Association, Association of Directors of Children's Services, Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, Principal Social Worker networks, employers and education providers to determine the most effective and proportionate route.

Data, equalities and transparency

The Government agrees that better data is essential to effective regulation, public confidence and understanding the operation and impact of regulation. Social Work England should prioritise improvements in data collection, data governance, validation, quality and completeness, including data relating to registration, education and training, fitness to practise, representation and equalities.

The Government also sees value in improving the register as a data asset for lawful and proportionate research where this supports effective regulation, including evaluation of regulatory processes and outcomes. This could include Social Work England asking registrants whether they consent to being contacted by Social Work England or Government for research and recording that preference in registration data shared with Government through existing arrangements. Any changes would need to be lawful, proportionate and consistent with Social Work England's statutory functions and data protection requirements.

The Government agrees that Social Work England should increase the visibility of its equalities work, including through better publication and use of data. This should support greater transparency on differential outcomes and disproportionality in regulatory processes, and on whether referral, triage, investigation and outcome decisions are proportionate and alert to bias and assumptions. This must remain consistent with a clear focus on public protection.

Social Work England should strengthen the evidence base on fitness to practise outcomes through research or evaluation of differential impacts on groups with particular characteristics. It should also improve data collection and analysis relating to fitness to practise proceedings, including consistent data on representation, education and training background, and the relationship of the complainant to the registrant. This should support better understanding of differential outcomes, access to representation, proportionality, potential bias and the operation of the process.

Implementation must be lawful, proportionate and mindful of burden. Further work will be needed to confirm how additional data should be collected and used, how privacy and data protection requirements will be met, and how any new data requirements can avoid unnecessary burdens on registrants, employers or education providers.

Response to individual recommendations

Recommendation 1: standards framework

Recommendation: Government, working with Social Work England and other relevant organisations, should create a single, clear framework that maps existing standards, explains what each is for, their status and how they relate to one another.

Response: The Government agrees that DfE and DHSC should work with Social Work England and relevant sector bodies to develop an overarching framework that clarifies the purpose, status and relationship of different standards, frameworks and guidance. This work should reduce duplication, support clearer expectations and improve coherence across professional regulation, qualifying education and professional development.

Recommendation 2: Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours and the Education and Training Standards

Recommendation: Social Work England should further strengthen the education and training standards by refining Knowledge, Skills and Behaviour statements before publishing the revised Education and Training Standards, including clarifying how they should be used for assessing practice placements.

Response: The Government agrees that Social Work England should review the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours before publishing revised Education and Training Standards, including clarifying how they should support practice placement assessment.

Social Work England launched three public consultations related to its quality assurance of social work courses on 11 June 2026 including their Education and Training Standards. Implementation and any further iteration of these standards will need to be sequenced carefully and will be subject to Secretary of State approval.

Recommendation 3: standardised route to qualification as a practice educator

Recommendation: Social Work England should consult on a standardised route to qualification as a practice educator.

Response: The Government supports Social Work England consulting on a standardised route to qualification as a practice educator. Practice educators are central to high-quality placements and student assessment. Further work will be needed with employers, education providers and the sector to consider capacity, recognition, burden, funding implications and implementation. This work should support quality and consistency in practice education while avoiding unnecessary barriers to expanding placement and practice educator capacity.

Recommendation 4: continuing professional development requirements

Recommendation: Social Work England should reform the current approach and processes for CPD requirements, to move from an annual CPD requirement to a three-year cycle, and include external moderation and meaningful assessment of CPD on the impact on professional practice.

Response: The Government agrees that continuing professional development should be more proportionate, meaningful and focused on professional practice. We support Social Work England reviewing the current CPD model, including whether CPD assurance should move to a longer cycle, how moderation could be strengthened, and how the model can better assess the impact on professional practice.

The Government recognises that annual fee collection, core registration data, confirmation of fitness to practise and register accuracy raise separate legal and operational considerations. Further work will therefore be needed before any changes are made to registration processes beyond the CPD model. Government will work with Social Work England to ensure that any future model supports public protection, public confidence, accurate registration data and proportionate requirements for social workers.

Recommendation 5: student behaviour and reporting fitness to practise concerns

Recommendation: Social Work England should set clear, consistent oversight processes and standards for student behaviour and explore how to strengthen processes, in partnership with course providers, to ensure a consistent approach when fitness to practise concerns are raised during a student's academic journey.

Response: The Government agrees that students should have a clear understanding of the professional standards expected of registered social workers, and that education and training providers should have consistent processes for managing and reporting relevant concerns. Further work will be needed with Social Work England, education providers and employers to consider the appropriate route, proportionality, data protection implications and alignment with existing suitability and registration processes.

Recommendation 6: standards architecture and longer-term Social Work England role

Recommendation: Government should consider, with key partners including Social Work England, how best to support the development of a coherent, profession-wide architecture that clarifies progression pathways, associated learning and development, and the standards that underpin practice. In the longer term, the quality of post-qualifying

education and training should be strengthened by extending Social Work England's role to include the setting and assuring of post-qualifying education and training standards.

Response: The DfE and DHSC will work with Social Work England and partners to consider how progression pathways, associated learning and development, and underpinning standards should fit together across children's and adults' social work.

The Government notes the review's longer-term proposal that Social Work England could have a role in setting and assuring post-qualifying education and training standards. We agree that this should not be taken forward at this point in time. Any extension of Social Work England's role would require further policy, legal, funding and delivery work, and would need to be carefully sequenced with Social Work England's existing core regulatory responsibilities and the immediate priority to improve fitness to practise.

Recommendation 7: annotation

Recommendation: Government should update regulations to require that social workers whose registration includes an annotation inform Social Work England of their appointment to an annotated role and notify the regulator of any changes to that status.

Response: An annotation is a marker on a social worker's entry on the Social Work England register showing that they have completed approved training for a specialist or statutory role, such as Approved Mental Health Professional or Best Interests Assessor. Annotations support public protection and workforce visibility by making specialist qualifications visible on the register, but the review found that the system needs to be clearer and more accurate.

The Government agrees that annotation should be clearer and more accurate, particularly where it relates to statutory roles. We will consider the changes needed to regulations to clarify expectations on annotated registrants, including requirements to notify Social Work England of appointment to an annotated role and any changes to that status. Further work is needed on scope, timing and alignment with wider policy on statutory roles, and any future changes to the annotation framework.

Recommendation 8: fitness to practise improvement plan

Recommendation: Social Work England should deliver, within six months, a comprehensive, end-to-end strategic improvement plan for fitness to practise. This should include revised forecasts and KPIs on timeliness and methods to track progress, and recalibrate at pace where needed. Social Work England should work with a relevant independent expert to provide effective challenge and scrutiny to this process and assurance of delivery improvements.

Response: Social Work England will be expected to deliver, within six months, an externally supported, end-to-end fitness to practise strategic improvement plan. The plan

should bring together existing work into a coherent approach covering business process, capability, resources and performance management, and must include revised forecasts and KPIs on timeliness, methods to track progress and clear delivery expectations. The Department for Education will strengthen oversight of this work and monitor progress closely, including whether progress is sufficient and whether recalibration is needed. If Social Work England does not meet the six-month deadline, or if reporting shows insufficient progress against the plan, the Government will escalate intervention, including through governance, sponsorship and statutory levers available to the Secretary of State.

Recommendation 9: fitness to practise legislative package

Recommendation: Government should take the next available opportunity to legislate to improve fitness to practise including:

- prioritising amending the Family Procedure Rules 2010 and/or the associated Practice Directions, to enable information relating to private family court proceedings to be lawfully shared with Social Work England in a manner which enables its lawful use in fitness to practise proceedings;
- updating Social Work England's powers on accepted disposals to enable them to impose an accepted disposal where a social worker has not engaged at all with the process;
- enabling the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) to request that a case examiner decision be revised; and
- limiting the upper time a social worker can be suspended to two years.

This should also include any further legislative change identified by the improvement strategy produced as a result of the end-to-end strategic improvement plan.

Response: The Government accepts in principle that legislative and procedural changes may be needed to support a more effective fitness to practise process. We will prioritise further work on the proposals identified by the review, including access to relevant information from private family court proceedings, accepted disposal powers where a social worker has not engaged with the process, the Professional Standards Authority's role in relation to case examiner decisions, and the maximum period for suspension.

These proposals will require further policy and legal work to determine the appropriate route, timing and cross-government dependencies. Any future proposal to introduce primary legislation would be subject to the usual collective agreement and Parliamentary clearance processes. We will also consider whether further legislative changes are needed following Social Work England's fitness to practise strategic improvement plan.

Recommendation 10: referral pathways

Recommendation: Government should work with the PSA, Social Work England and health and care professional regulators to consider what changes are needed to support appropriate referrals, particularly when other avenues have not been exhausted.

Response: Referral pathways should be considered further, particularly where concerns may be better addressed through local complaints processes or other routes before regulatory action is required. We will work with the Professional Standards Authority, Social Work England and relevant regulators to consider whether changes are needed. Any changes must continue to support public protection and public confidence while ensuring that fitness to practise processes are focused on matters that properly require regulatory action.

Recommendation 11: communications strategy

Recommendation: Social Work England should develop a refreshed communications strategy focused on:

- All registrants: ensuring effective and clear communication with registrants and applicants;
- fitness to practise: ensuring those under investigation, those who have made referrals, and witnesses receive regular updates on their cases, employers are clear what is required of them and that evidence-gathering with them is streamlined; and
- the wider system: improving transparency about performance, processes, and the organisation's improvement strategy.

Response: The Government agrees that Social Work England should develop a refreshed communications strategy covering communication with registrants and applicants, communication through the fitness to practise process, and wider transparency about performance, processes and improvement activity. This should support clearer understanding of Social Work England's role, professional standards, registration, CPD and fitness to practise, and should form part of the wider improvement approach.

Recommendation 12: fitness to practise equalities and employer action

Recommendation: Social Work England should increase visibility of the action it is already taking on equalities including by publishing more substantive and detailed data on equalities aspects of regulation and encouraging employers to take action based on the data.

Response: The Government agrees that Social Work England should increase the visibility of its equalities work, including by publishing more substantive data on equalities aspects of regulation and encouraging employers to consider and act on the evidence.

This should support greater transparency on differential outcomes and disproportionality in regulatory processes, and on whether referral and fitness to practise decisions are proportionate and alert to bias and assumptions.

Recommendation 13: fitness to practise equalities research and evaluation

Recommendation: Social Work England should commission research or evaluation on fitness to practise to explore and address concerns about differential impacts on groups with particular characteristics.

Response: The Government agrees that Social Work England should strengthen the evidence base on fitness to practise outcomes, including differential impacts on groups with particular characteristics. This should include consideration of whether decisions and outcomes are proportionate, and how bias or assumptions may affect referral, progression, sanctions or experience of the process. This should support fairer, more transparent and more evidence-led regulation.

Recommendation 14: Social Work England's remit and core functions

Recommendation: Government should clarify the role of Social Work England as focussed on core regulatory functions. This does not preclude Social Work England using its unique position to support improvement through the provision of data and intelligence, but it should not carry out improvement or advocacy activities.

Response: Government agrees that Social Work England's role should be clearly focused on core regulatory functions. Its primary role is to protect the public through professional standards, registration, education and training assurance and fitness to practise.

We agree that a clear focus on core regulation does not mean Social Work England should withdraw from proportionate engagement, communications, research, data, co-production or equalities activity where these support effective regulation, public protection, workforce insight or understanding of the profession. Its national register, regulatory data and sector reach can legitimately support evidence-gathering, research, policy development and system learning.

However, its role should remain distinct from professional representation, advocacy or wider sector improvement delivery. Social Work England should not be expected to act as the voice of the profession or to lead improvement activity that properly sits with Government, employers or wider sector bodies.

Recommendation 15: Board succession and social work expertise

Recommendation: Government should work with Social Work England to support effective and strong succession planning and recruitment to the Board. This should include early consideration of required expertise, including in change management, particularly in regulation, as well as codifying the requirement to have appropriate social work expertise within its membership in the framework document.

Response: The Government agrees that future appointments and succession planning should support a Board with the right breadth of expertise to provide effective challenge and assurance, including expertise in change management, regulation, fitness to practise, finance, delivery and social work.

The Government agrees with the importance of social work expertise at Board level and will consider how this should be reflected through future appointments, governance documentation and sponsorship arrangements. This will need to be considered alongside the wider skills, experience and public appointments requirements needed for an effective Board.

Recommendation 16: Professional Standards Authority information power

Recommendation: Government should introduce a new power for the PSA to require information to support their oversight and scrutiny functions.

Response: The Government agrees that the Professional Standards Authority should have appropriate information to support effective oversight and scrutiny. Further policy and legal work will be needed to determine the scope, route and timing of any new information power, including how it would interact with Social Work England's existing duties and wider regulatory reform.

Recommendation 17: employer standards

Recommendation: Government should work with the LGA and wider sector to strengthen and embed the employer standards, with a focus on employers' role in regulation.

Response: Employer roles and expectations should be clearer, including in relation to placement provision and quality, fitness to practise referrals, information sharing and CPD. Government will work with the LGA and wider sector to consider the extent to which employer standards could be strengthened and embedded, with a particular focus on employers' role in supporting effective regulation.

This work will need to align with the wider standards and development architecture described in recommendation 6, including progression pathways, learning and development, and the standards that underpin practice. It should support public protection, high-quality professional development and clearer employer responsibilities without creating unnecessary burden.

Recommendation 18: data collection, governance and validation

Recommendation: Social Work England should prioritise improvements in data collection, data governance and data validation set out in their strategy.

Response: Social Work England should prioritise improvements in data collection, governance and validation, in line with its data strategy. Better data is essential to effective regulation, equalities monitoring and public confidence and understanding the operation and impact of regulation.

Recommendation 19: data collection and analysis of fitness to practise

Recommendation: Social Work England should extend data collection and analysis relating to fitness to practise proceedings. This should include collecting additional consistent data on those referred, including:

- whether individuals have legal or professional representation
- educational and training background
- the relationship of the complainant to the registrant.

Response: The Government agrees that Social Work England should improve data collection and analysis relating to fitness to practise proceedings, including consistent data on representation, education and training background, and the relationship of the complainant to the registrant. This should support better understanding of differential outcomes, access to representation, proportionality, potential bias and the operation of the process. Implementation must be lawful, proportionate and mindful of burden.

Recommendation 20: sponsorship and joint oversight

Recommendation: Sponsorship arrangements should be strengthened through better joint working across DfE and DHSC, with clearer strategic direction set through joint ministerial oversight. This should be complemented by greater senior official involvement to reinforce accountability, support consistent strategic alignment, and ensure Social Work England has clear expectations from government.

Response: Sponsorship arrangements should be strengthened through better joint working between the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social

Care, clearer strategic direction, appropriate joint ministerial oversight and greater senior official involvement. Sponsorship should reflect both children's and adults' social work, reinforce accountability, support consistent strategic alignment and ensure Social Work England has clear expectations from Government.

Recommendation 21: funding certainty and risk tolerance framework

Recommendation: Government should consider ways of providing Social Work England earlier and clearer indications of its funding. This could include letters of comfort for its ongoing budget into the next financial year and multi-year grants for specific programmes where appropriate. It should also include providing Social Work England with an explicit risk-tolerance framework setting out expectations around financial prudence, reserves and forward commitments.

Response: The Government recognises the importance of earlier and clearer funding signals for effective planning and delivery. DfE will work with Social Work England, HM Treasury and other relevant partners to consider how funding indications, letters of comfort and targeted grant arrangements and an explicit risk-tolerance framework could support delivery of statutory functions, while remaining consistent with public finance requirements and wider spending controls.

Next Steps

The Government will now work with Social Work England and partners across the sector to take forward this response.

Our immediate priority is to secure visible and sustained improvement in fitness to practise. Social Work England will be expected to move at pace and deliver, within six months, an externally supported strategic improvement plan, with clear milestones, revised forecasts and KPIs, strengthened oversight and regular visibility of progress. If Social Work England does not meet this deadline, or if reporting shows insufficient progress against the plan, the Government will escalate intervention, including through governance, sponsorship and statutory levers available to the Secretary of State.

The Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care will work together with Social Work England to clarify the regulator's role, strengthen sponsorship and accountability, and develop a clearer framework for standards and professional development. We will also work with Social Work England and partners on the recommendations relating to practice education, registration and CPD, annotation, post-qualifying standards, communications, data, equalities, employer roles and funding.

Where recommendations require consultation, further policy development, funding decisions, changes to rules or regulations, or primary legislation, the Government will consider the appropriate route and timing. Any future proposal to introduce primary legislation would be subject to the usual collective agreement and Parliamentary clearance processes.

The Government is committed to ensuring that social work regulation supports public protection, public confidence and clear professional standards, and that the response to this review leads to practical and sustained improvement.

E03644200
978-1-5286-6729-6