

(Observers) Social Work England Board Meeting

MEETING

17 July 2026 10:30 BST

PUBLISHED

10 July 2026

Social Work England Board Meeting

Friday 17 July 2026, 10:30 – 13:00

at The Don, Social Work England and by videoconference

AGENDA

Item	Time	Topic	Paper / Ref.	Board Action	Lead
1.	10:30	Welcome Apologies for absence and declarations of interest	Verbal	To note/declare	Chair
2.	10:35	Minutes of the meeting held on 15 May 2026	Paper 01	To approve	Chair
3.	10:40	Matters arising and action log	Paper 02	To discuss and note	Chair
4.	10:45	Chair's report	Verbal	To note	Chair
5.	10:55	Chief executive's report	Paper 03	To discuss and note	Chief Executive
6.	11:05	Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation: Response and planned actions	Paper 04	To discuss and advise	Chair; Chief Executive
7.	11:25	Audit and risk assurance committee chair's report - Business case: Re-procurement of legal services (corporate and litigation) - Final audit completion report Annual report and accounts 2025 to 2026 - Chair's annual report 2025/26 - Chair's report	Paper 05* Paper 06* Weblink Paper 07* Paper 08*	To discuss, note and approve	Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Chair; Head of Legal (Senior Lawyer); Head of Legal (Regulation)
8.	11:40	Policy Committee Chair's report	Paper 09*	To note	Policy Committee Chair

Item	Time	Topic	Paper / Ref.	Board Action	Lead
9.	11:50	Sustainability Plan 2025/26 achievements - Strategic Plan 2026 - 2030 - Priority actions 2026/27	Paper 10* Annexe 10a * Annexe 10b* Annexe 10c*	To discuss and approve	Executive Director, People and Business Support: Assistant Director, Assurance and Improvement
10.	12:00	Corporate Risk Report Risk appetite statement 2026/27	Paper 11* Annexe 11a* Annexe 11b*	To discuss, note and approve	Head of Business Planning and Improvement; Risk Manager
11.	12:10	Quarter 1 performance report 2026/27 Fitness to Practise performance Q1 2026/27	Paper 12 Paper 13	To discuss and note	Head of Business Planning and Improvement; Executive Directors
12.	12:25	Finance and commercial report Management accounts to 30 June 2026	Paper 14	To discuss and note	Executive Director, People and Business Support: Head of Finance and Commercial
13.	12:35	Fitness to Practise concerns and referrals research outcomes	Paper 15	To discuss and note	Executive Director, Regulation; Senior Policy Manager (Research and Public Affairs)
14.	12:45	Social Work Week 2026 evaluation	Paper 16 To follow	To discuss and advise	Regional Engagement Lead
15.	12:55	Review of the meeting and forward plan	Verbal Paper 17* To follow	To discuss and note	Chair
	13:00	Meeting to close			
		Date of next meeting: Friday 25 September 2026 - Board Strategy away session			

* Papers marked with an asterisk are 'private' to protect confidentiality according to our guidance for publishing board papers.

LIST OF ATTENDANCE

Board members:	Dr Andrew McCulloch	Chair, Non-executive Director
	Dr Adi Cooper	Deputy chair, Non-executive Director
	Cheryl Hobson	Non-executive Director
	Amrat Khorana	Non-executive Director
	Simon Lewis	Non-executive Director
	Chris Nicholson	Non-executive Director
	Dr Sue Ross	Non-executive Director
	Colum Conway	Chief Executive
Boardroom Apprentice:	Bhavna Chandra	Boardroom Apprentice
Staff in attendance:	Linda Dale	Executive Director, People and Business Support
	Sarah Blackmore	Executive Director, Professional Practice and External Engagement
	Philip Hallam	Executive Director, Regulation
	Clarissa Allford	Risk Manager (Item 10 only)
	Sophie Bennet	Head of Finance and Commercial
	Natalie Day	Assistant Director, Policy and Strategy
	Stephen Hale	Assistant Director, Digital Programme Manager
	Rosie Hancock	Head of Legal (Senior Lawyer) – Business Support (Item 07 only)
	Rachel Lloyd	Assistant Director, Regulation (Registration, Advice and Adjudications)
	Gavin Moorghen	Regional Engagement Lead (Item 14 only)
	Rebecca Mulvaney	Senior Policy Manager (Research and Public Affairs) (Item 13 only)
	Faith Salih	Head of Legal (Regulation) (Item 07 only)
	Neil Smith-McOnie	Head of Business Planning and Improvement (Item 13 only)
	Alexandra Hayward	Fitness to Practice Performance Manager (Item 11 only)
Sponsor team:	Joe Stockwell	Assistant Director, Assurance and Improvement
	Andrew Wise	Department for Education
	Peter Royle	Department for Education

	Jo Denyer	Department for Education
	Nusrat Shaheen	Department for Education
Public observers:	Ben Jones	Unison
	Colette Higham	Professional Standards Authority
	Graham Mockler	Professional Standards Authority
Staff observers:	Nasheen Oya	Head of Investigations
Minute taker:	Alison Edbury	Corporate Governance Manager
	Dani Shaw	Executive Assistant
Apologies:		
	Stephen Barnett	Assistant Director, Regulation (Investigations)

Minutes of the Social Work England board meeting for approval
Friday 15 May 2026, 10.00am – 12.30pm
at The Don, Social Work England and by videoconference

Board members:	Dr Andrew McCulloch	Chair, Non-executive Director
	Amrat Khorana	Non-executive Director
	Cheryl Hobson	Non-executive Director
	Chris Nicholson	Non-executive Director
	Dr Adi Cooper	Non-executive Director
	Dr Sue Ross	Non-executive Director
	Simon Lewis	Non-executive Director
	Colum Conway	Chief Executive
Board Apprentice	Bhavna Chandra	Boardroom Apprentice
Staff in attendance:	Linda Dale	Executive Director, People and Business Support
	Sarah Blackmore	Executive Director, Professional Practice and External Engagement
	Phil Hallam	Executive Director, Regulation
	Natalie Day	Assistant Director, Policy and Strategy
	Stephen Hale	Assistant Director - Digital Programme Manager
	Joseph Stockwell	Assistant Director, Assurance and Improvement
	Rachel Lloyd	Assistant Director, Regulation (Registration, Advice and Adjudications) (Items 1 to 8 only)
	Stephen Barnett	Assistant Director, Regulation (Investigations)
	Neil Smith-McOnie	Head of Business Planning and Improvement (Items 10 and 11 only)
	Louise Broddle	Head of Education Programmes
	Clarissa Allford	Risk Manager (Items 10 and 11 only)
	Kaye Gilbert	Senior Finance Business Partner
Sponsor Team:	Andrew Wise	Department for Education
	Peter Royle	Department for Education
	Nusrat Shaheen	Department for Education
	Jo Denyer	Department for Education
Public observers:	Richard West	Professional Standards Authority
	Graham Mockler	Professional Standards Authority
Staff observers:	Jasmin Coggins	Data & Insight Analyst
	Alison Edbury	Corporate Governance Manager
Minute taker:	Penny Clarke	Corporate Governance Manager
	Daniella Shaw	Executive Assistant
Apologies:	None	

1. Welcome, apologies for absence and declarations of interest

- 1.1 The chair welcomed board members, colleagues and observers to the meeting.
- 1.2 There were no apologies received.
- 1.3 There were no declarations of interest made.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

Paper 01

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting on 13 March 2026 were **approved** as a correct record.

3. Matters arising and action log

Paper 02

- 3.1 There were no matters arising.
- 3.2 The chair reviewed the action log. All actions closed at or since the last meeting were **approved** as follows:

- **Action 130:** The assistant director, policy and strategy to provide a report on feedback and thematic findings from the initial AMHP and BIA inspections to a future board meeting. *The outcome of the inspections including feedback and findings can be found in the quarterly performance report section of board papers.* **Action to close.**
- **Action 131:** The executive director, people and business support to update the board on progress and outcomes from the finance and commercial recruitment. *Kaye Gilbert, Senior Finance Business Partner, started in post on 16 March and has settled in well. The new Head of Finance and Commercial, Sophie Bennet, was starting on 19 May.* **Action to close.**
- **Action 134:** The executive director, regulation to model and present at the next board meeting, the assumptions and resource requirements for managing FtP referrals at both 230 and 250 cases per month, including the impact of the process review changes and resource flexibility. *This was due to be presented during the board strategy session on the afternoon of 15 May 2026.* **Action to close.**

- 3.3 With regards to **Action 135**, the executive director, professional practice and external engagement noted that registrants had now been informed of the intention to review up to 3% of CPD records. The board endorsed this approach as appropriate and aligned with wider CPD strategy development. The chair requested that all direct communications of this nature to registered social worker be shared with him for awareness.

Action: Executive director, professional practice and external engagement to provide chair of the board with copies of communications issued to registered social workers regarding the CPD review, or any other matter of strategic importance, for awareness.

4. Chair's report

Verbal

- 4.1 The chair reported ongoing engagement with the independent review of Social Work England, including meetings with the review team to provide feedback, share organisational insight and contribute to the development of recommendations. This work is continuing.
- 4.2 The chair also reported on participation in meetings with the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) and fellow chairs of regulators within its remit. These discussions focused on cross-sector challenges, including the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on professional regulation and emerging approaches to its use. The chair noted that materials from these discussions, including a presentation on AI, would be shared with the board in due course.
- 4.3 It was further noted that there is a consistent increase in fitness to practise referrals across the regulatory sector, with other regulators reporting increases of between 10% and 40% over the past year. This issue is being considered collectively through the PSA, including a group led by the General Medical Council (GMC).
- 4.4 The chair reported participation in Social Work Week, including attendance at a number of sessions and chairing a session focused on working with older people.
- 4.5 The chair continues to engage informally with other regulatory chairs through regular confidential discussions, providing an opportunity to share learning and reflect on common challenges.
- 4.6 The chair noted the intention for the board to consider the implications of AI at a future meeting (July or September), including an assessment of risks and opportunities, and consideration of governance and oversight arrangements for the use of AI within Social Work England and across the sector.
- 4.7 The board **noted** the report.

5. Chief executive's report

Paper 03

- 5.1 The chief executive introduced the report and highlighted the following key areas:
- 5.2 Engagement:
 - There had been strong engagement in recent months with key bodies and representative organisations across the sector, with relationships becoming increasingly positive. A continued focus on direct engagement with registrants was noted, including the launch of a registrant survey the following week, using consistent questions with the previous survey to enable trend analysis.
- 5.3 Emerging technologies:

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- Progress was being made with the digital, data and technology (DDaT) programme, including principles and governance for the use of emerging technologies. A detailed discussion on DDaT had taken place at audit and risk assurance committee (ARAC), which would be brought to the board in due course. The importance of understanding risks and mitigating these through appropriate governance was highlighted, alongside consideration of the use of emerging technologies within the profession.
- An upcoming AI summit, developed in collaboration with Skills for Care, had a comprehensive agenda and was expected to be well-attended. The findings and next steps would be reported back to the board.

5.4 Business plan:

- The business plan for the year ahead (2026/27) had been published. The chief executive thanked the board for its support in its development.

5.5 The following points were raised and discussed by the board:

- The board noted the success of Social Work Week 2026, particularly the strong involvement from people with lived experience and the National Advisory Forum. In response to a question about trends in participation and engagement, it was confirmed that 5,437 people had attended, a slight reduction from last year, however there had been a reduced attrition rate (42%) and longer session participation. Feedback highlighted the value of diverse session topics, including areas such as palliative care and disability. An evaluation report would be brought to a future meeting, including feedback, attendance data and comparisons with previous years.
- A board member questioned whether Social Work Week was a 'core' activity for Social Work England, and about the costs (financial and staff time). In response, it was confirmed that Social Work Week is delivered at minimal cost and remains an important and cost-effective mechanism for engagement, supporting statutory objectives around professional standards and public confidence. It provided a valuable mechanism to engage directly with the sector and with registrants, focusing on aspects of our regulation and what it meant to have a protected title. Sessions this year had included presentations from other regulators and on CPD, a key element of ongoing fitness to practise.
- The board agreed that it was important for the profession to have a two-way communication route, and for the regulator to be able to hear about the context for social work and how it was operating. The chair noted that he attended the GMC annual conference every year which had a similar focus.
- The executive director, professional practice and external engagement noted that for the first time this year, the programme had included a joint session with British Association of Social Workers (BASW) which had set out the differing roles of each organisation. In response to a question about the relationship with BASW, the executive director confirmed that this was now very positive. Dr Ross

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and the deputy chair noted that they were both BASW members, declaring an interest. The chair advised the board that he met regularly with the chair of BASW for confidential discussions and had a very good and productive relationship.

5.6 The board **noted** the report.

6. Audit and risk assurance committee (ARAC) chair's report Paper 04*/Paper 05*

- 6.1 The ARAC chair reported on discussion at the committee meeting on 1 May.
- 6.2 The committee had scrutinised and sought assurances relating to the business case for re-procurement of Appian licences, the draft DDaT strategy, proposed amendments to the regulatory scheme of delegation, and external audit planning.
- 6.3 The Appian business case was a separate agenda item for decision by the board later in the meeting. ARAC had questioned the potential timeframe; this had been looked at, with resulting changes to the proposed contract period and value. The committee recommended the business case to the board for approval and also recommended that authorisation be given to the chief executive to approve up to a 10% cost variance on the actual licence costs.
- 6.4 The National Audit Office's (NAO) audit of the 2025/26 accounts was progressing well, with a further on-site visit scheduled and an additional ARAC meeting scheduled for 10 June.
- 6.5 The internal auditors (RSM) had provided a positive audit opinion for 2025/26, which would support the governance statement in the annual report and accounts.
- 6.6 The committee had discussed the 2026/27 budget position and the potential for financial pressures to materialise later in the year. It had agreed that a deep dive on the budget position and end-year forecast would take place at the October meeting, to support effective oversight and informed decision-making.
- 6.7 The board **discussed** the Appian business case. A board member questioned the delegation thresholds for financial decisions, noting that the current threshold for ARAC and board approval appeared to be quite low. It was confirmed that thresholds would be reviewed by the incoming Head of Finance and Commercial, with any proposed changes to be brought back to the board. In the interim, the current thresholds remained in place and would be complied with.
- 6.8 The board **approved** the Appian business case, including delegated authority for the chief executive to approve a variance in actual licence costs up to 10%.

7. Policy committee chair's report Verbal

- 7.1 The policy committee chair noted that the committee had not met since the previous board meeting, with the next meeting scheduled for June.
- 7.2 The policy committee chair asked the board to approve co-option of an additional member, Andrea Collins, to strengthen expertise in relation to the education and training sector.

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- 7.3 The proposed co-opted member brought highly relevant expertise, including involvement in apprenticeship standards and the Education and Training Advisory Forum, which would support the committee's work and provide valuable insight.
- 7.4 The board chair noted that co-option was available to all committees and enabled the inclusion of targeted expertise to support specific areas of work where required. Committee chairs were encouraged to consider opportunities for co-opting relevant specialists, for example individuals with expertise in artificial intelligence to support ARAC and DDaT discussions.
- 7.5 The board **approved** the co-option of Andrea Collins, chair of the education and training advisory forum and head of social work at Manchester Metropolitan University, to the policy committee, subject to completion of governance procedures.

8. Remuneration committee chair's report

Verbal

- 8.1 The board received a verbal update from the remuneration committee chair following the meeting held on 08 May 2026, which the chair of the board had attended. Amrat Khorana had also attended to observe the meeting.
- 8.2 The meeting agenda included:
- a review of the chief executive's performance for 2025-26,
 - a discussion about the chief executive's objectives for 2026-27,
 - a report on outcomes and achievements of the 2023-26 people strategy,
 - the people priorities for 2026-27, and
 - a review of current people data and risks.
 - the committee also carried out its annual effectiveness review.
- 8.3 In relation to the chief executive's performance, the committee was assured that the chief executive continued to perform well, in what had been a challenging year in many respects. During the year 10 of the 11 business plan objectives had been achieved. Where there are performance challenges, particularly in relation to fitness to practise (FtP), the committee is assured that appropriate action had been taken to address these. The committee's recommendation to the board is that the CEO is to receive the 2% non-consolidated pay award.
- 8.4 The committee scrutinised the CEO's objectives for 2026/27 and noted that these will need to be revisited in light of the findings of the independent review of Social Work England, once the report is published.
- 8.5 The committee recognised that the current people strategy had laid strong foundations. The staff retention rate is now 89% and sickness absence is on average 7 days over the past 12 months. Both of these figures are positive and represent significant improvement over the past couple of years.
- 8.6 In 2026/27, the focus will be on delivering improvements to people data and reporting, and on developing a longer-term workforce and financial plan aligned to our next organisational strategy.

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- 8.7 The review of committee effectiveness concluded that the committee is generally receiving the right level of input and is focusing on the right areas. There was a consensus that the name of the committee should be changed to the ‘people’ committee, to better reflect its focus on people and culture. There was also agreement that an annual calendar of events should be developed, to provide the committee with more opportunities to engage directly with staff networks.
- 8.8 In discussion, the board questioned whether its existing membership possessed sufficient expertise in relation to people matters. It was agreed that this specialism may need to be secured via co-option or potentially future board recruitment. The chair of the board noted that there would be vacancies in 2027 for a new chair and two new board members; people expertise would be a priority alongside social work expertise.
- 8.9 The board **noted** the report and **approved** the 2% non-consolidated pay award for the CEO.

Action: The corporate governance manager to communicate the approval of the 2% non-consolidated pay award for the CEO to the senior business partner.

The assistant director, regulation (registration, advice and adjudications) left the meeting at 10:45

9. Finance and commercial report

Paper 06*

Management accounts to 31 March 2026

- 9.1 The board received the finance and commercial report, which was introduced by the executive director, people and business support.
- 9.2 The executive director noted that two in-year budget adjustments had been made as a result of challenges in aligning expenditure with income, including changes to grant-in-aid. Following these adjustments, the year-end position was a small overspend, which was not considered material. It was confirmed that the financial key performance indicator had been achieved as a result of these adjustments.
- 9.3 It was confirmed that the 2025/26 overspend had been discussed with the Department for Education (DfE), who had not raised any concerns. It was noted that, in the context of the overall accounts, the variance would not make a significant or material difference, and that DfE were satisfied with the organisation’s transparency in explaining the position.
- 9.4 Capital expenditure was £111k (4%) below budget, primarily due to delays in the timing of planned projects.
- 9.5 The executive director explained that the agreed 2026/27 budget plan reflects current operational pressures, particularly within fitness to practise, and includes a planned approach to managing financial risk. this includes operating with a degree of managed risk through careful overplanning of activity to mitigate the risk of underspend and

support delivery against organisational priorities. it was noted that this approach requires balancing financial control with the need to invest appropriately in areas of demand and avoiding an overly risk adverse position where this would impact delivery.

9.6 In relation to the 2026/27 position, it was noted that the budget settlement had been confirmed by DfE and that the organisation would actively manage delivery against this throughout the year. Financial and activity performance will be closely monitored and reported regularly to the board, including through routine reporting and forecasting, with adjustments made as required to ensure alignment between operational delivery and financial performance.

9.7 The board received an update on commercial activity, including the outcome of re-procurement of legal advocacy services. Contracts were expected to be awarded by July, and the board was assured that arrangements were in hand to onboard new providers.

9.8 The board **noted** the report.

Risk manager and head of business planning and improvement joined the meeting at 11:50

10. Quarter 4 performance report 2025/26

Fitness to practise performance Q4 2025/26

Paper 07

10.1 The executive director, professional practice and external engagement reported that performance across the directorate was largely on track. Progress against objectives was positive overall, with the exception of education and training standards, where delivery was highly time-sensitive due to the need to align with DfE developments in children's social care and to take account of the forthcoming Independent Review. Work was ongoing with departmental colleagues to progress this at pace while ensuring appropriate alignment.

10.2 The executive director highlighted key areas of activity, including ongoing engagement with the sector and delivery Social Work Week and other initiatives to support public confidence in the profession. It was noted that the organisation had informed the sector of its intention to reinstate sampling of continuing professional development (CPD) records, as an interim measure while longer-term arrangements were considered, and that engagement with stakeholders would continue to inform this approach.

10.3 Progress was also reported across research and practice education. A new head of research had been appointed to lead the development of the organisation's research strategy, and there has been strong engagement from the sector, including high response rates to surveys and participation in discussion forums. Practice education work continues to progress, supported by expert advisory groups and targeted recruitment to strengthen capacity.

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- 10.4 Inspection activity, including Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) courses, was progressing well and remains on track for completion.
- 10.5 The executive director also noted ongoing work in response to developments in the external environment, including early career standards, local government reform and wider policy changes.
- 10.6 The board discussed progress on education and training standards and sought clarification on the reasons for delay. It was explained that this related to alignment with developments in early career standards and placements, as well as the need to consider the outcomes of the independent review.
- 10.7 The board welcomed the reinstatement of CPD sampling and emphasised the importance of responding to feedback from the sector. It was noted that while CPD requirements may not be universally supported by registrants, engagement and clear communication remained important.
- 10.8 The board discussed practice education and requested that a report on the findings of best interest assessor (BIA) inspections be brought to a future meeting. It was confirmed that there was an intention to provide a consolidated report later in the year.
- 10.9 The board sought assurance on learning from the non-approval of a course. It was reported that the organisation had worked closely with the provider and that learning would inform future inspection activity, noting that other programmes from the provider had been approved under different arrangements.
- 10.10 The executive director, regulation reported strong performance within registration, with all key performance indicators being met and timeliness maintained, including restoration activity.
- 10.11 The executive director reported sustained demand pressures in fitness to practice, with referrals having increased significantly during 2025/26. Improvements in triage activity had been noted, including increased decision-making volumes and early indications of a reduction in caseload. Actions taken to improve performance had included changes to the staffing model and the appointment of a head of triage, with further recommendations from the process review to be discussed later in the meeting.
- 10.12 Performance in investigations had improved and had been better than forecast. At case examination stage, performance earlier in the year had been impacted by vacancies; however, additional recruitment had since taken place to support increased throughput.
- 10.13 At the hearing stage, activity levels had exceeded forecast, although a backlog of cases remained. It was noted that, under current assumptions, it would take several years to reduce the backlog to a steady state. Work had been ongoing to increase capacity and improve throughput, including through procurement of additional legal support.
- 10.14 In relation to fitness to practise, the board discussed the increase in referrals and the wider regulatory context. It was noted that similar trends had been observed across

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other regulators and that work was ongoing with the Professional Standards Authority and others to understand drivers and consider potential responses.

- 10.15 The board discussed the sustainability of performance improvements and the time required to reduce the hearings backlog. The board emphasised the importance of managing expectations and ensuring clear and accessible communication with stakeholders regarding timescales and process complexity. The board also noted the importance of ongoing board scrutiny and challenge in relation to fitness to practice performance.
- 10.16 The board also discussed the potential impact of wider system changes, including pressures on complaints mechanisms and the abolition of external bodies, and the implications for regulatory demand.
- 10.17 The board recognised the executive director, regulation's expertise in this area, noting that his knowledge and experience were of a high standard and comparable with leading practice across the regulatory sector.
- 10.18 The executive director, people and business support reported that overall organisational performance had remained in line with expectations, as set out in the executive summary. The focus had been on managing operational pressures, particularly within fitness to practise, while maintaining delivery across corporate and support functions. Ongoing work had included strengthening data quality and governance, improving the consistency and accessibility of performance reporting, and ensuring closer alignment between operational delivery and financial planning to support more effective monitoring and decision-making.
- 10.19 The executive director also highlighted progress in the DDaT programme, including improvements in programme delivery and the development of organisational capability. Work had been underway to improve efficiency through the use of data and emerging technologies, including exploring opportunities to automate routine processes and support decision-making, supported by appropriate governance and risk management arrangements.
- 10.20 The board highlighted the importance of continuing to explore opportunities to improve efficiency and resilience, including further consideration of workforce models and the use of technology to support delivery. In discussion, members also emphasised the need to ensure that improvements in systems and processes were aligned with operational priorities and supported sustainable performance across the organisation.
- 10.21 The board **noted** the report.

The board took a short break and returned at 11:50

11. Corporate risk register

Paper 08*

- 11.1 The risk manager introduced the item and highlighted key developments.

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- 11.2 The board noted updates to the deep dive schedule and that the risk appetite statement would be brought to ARAC for consideration in June, with board approval sought in July.
- 11.3 The board considered Annex A, noting the visual presentation of risk movement over time. This was welcomed.
- 11.4 The ARAC chair explained that the committee had undertaken detailed scrutiny of the risk register, including risks relating to financial management and budget pressures, and had sought assurance on mitigating actions. The committee chair confirmed that the register provided a clear and effective representation of risk, with the movement of risks over time being particularly helpful for oversight.
- 11.5 The board **noted** the report.

Risk manager and head of business planning and improvement left the meeting at 12:05

12. The role of seriousness in FtP proceedings in social work in England Paper 09

- 12.1 The assistant director, policy and strategy introduced the outcomes of initial research relating to the assessment of seriousness within the FtP process.
- 12.2 The research formed part of a wider programme of research to strengthen the evidence base underpinning FtP and support continuous improvement. The research drew upon a comprehensive methodology, including literature review, analysis of case material and engagement with internal and external stakeholders, including other regulators.
- 12.3 These initial findings highlighted a number of challenges in defining and applying the concept of seriousness. These included the absence of a consistent definition, the influence of contextual factors such as seniority and circumstances, and the need to distinguish between isolated errors and patterns of behaviour. It was noted that these challenges are common across regulatory bodies and are not unique to Social Work England.
- 12.4 The assistant director, policy and strategy outlined that the research was intended to support greater consistency and transparency in decision-making, particularly at the triage stage where high volumes of referrals were being assessed and initial judgments on seriousness were required. The findings would inform the development of guidance, enhance decision-making quality, and support demand management by enabling more robust and proportionate assessments at an earlier stage.
- 12.5 The research had generated interest from a range of external stakeholders and partner organisations. The full report was expected to be published in the coming weeks and would contribute to ongoing work to improve the effectiveness, consistency and proportionality of the FtP process.
- 12.6 The board **noted** the report and welcomed the research.

13. Review of the meeting

Verbal

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13.1 The chair reflected that the meeting had achieved a good balance of challenge and support. No further comments or other business were raised, therefore the meeting ended and the chair thanked attendees for their contributions.

Date and time of next meeting: Friday 17 July 2026, 10.30am - 1.00pm

The meeting ended at 12:22 pm

Summary of actions

- Executive director, professional practice and external engagement to provide chair of the board with copies of communications issued to registered social workers regarding the CPD review for awareness.
- The corporate governance manager to communicate the approval of the 2% non-consolidated pay award for the CEO to the senior business partner.

* Papers marked with an asterisk are 'private' to protect confidentiality according to our guidance for publishing board papers.

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Summary of actions from board meetings up to 17 July 2026

Agenda Item 03 Paper Ref 02

Paper for the

Social Work England Board

Sponsor

The Chair

Author

Penny Clarke, Corporate Governance Manager

Date

17 July 2026

Reviewed by

Linda Dale, Executive Director, People and Business Support

This paper is for

Assurance and Noting

Associated Strategic Objective

SO10: Continually develop and improve how we work, ensuring we are a well-run organisation that delivers the right outcomes and provides value for money.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite

Governance and compliance – Cautious

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

N/A

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1. Summary

The actions below provide an audit trail of items closed at or since the last board meeting on 15 May 2026. Actions still in progress or yet to complete since the last meeting are listed on the log that follows.

Closed actions following the last meeting on 15 May 2026:

- **Action 130:** Assistant director, policy and strategy to provide a report on feedback and thematic findings from the initial AMHP and BIA inspections to a future board meeting. *The outcome of the inspections including feedback and findings can be found in the quarterly performance report section of board papers.* **Action closed.**
- **Action 131:** Executive director, people and business support to update the board on progress and outcomes from the finance and commercial recruitment. *Kaye Gilbert, Senior Finance Business Partner, started in post on 16 March and the new Head of Finance and Commercial, Sophie Bennet, started on 19 May.* **Action closed.**
- **Action 134:** Executive director, regulation to model and present at the next board meeting, the assumptions and resource requirements for managing Fitness to Practise referrals at both 230 and 250 cases per month, including the impact of the process review changes and resource flexibility. *This was presented and discussed at the board strategy session on the afternoon of 15 May 2026.* **Action closed.**

Actions pending sign off at the 17 July 2026 meeting:

- **Action 132:** Executive director professional practice and external engagement to share learning and insights from Social Work Week to inform policy committee discussions. *An overview of Social Work Week formed part of the Executive Director's report at the last Policy Committee, a paper will be presented to board at the 17 July board meeting.* **Action to close.**
- **Action 135:** Executive director for professional practice to develop and communicate clearer milestones and interim steps for the CPD review, including trials or testing, to provide assurance to the board and the profession about ongoing work and progress. *Work is continuing to advance our review of CPD, with regular updates to the board and the broader profession as part of our ongoing work. Building on recent board discussions, we notified the register on 12 May of plans to review CPD records for this registration year.* [Social Work England confirms updated approach to reviewing CPD records - Social Work England](#) **Action to close.**
- **Action 136:** Corporate governance manager to make the amendments to the code of conduct for board members, declarations of interest, conflict resolution policy and the gifts and hospitality policies and seek the chair's approval. *The suggested amendments from the board meeting on 13 March have been made to the policies and these have been approved by the chair. The policies have been shared with the corporate documents team for publication on the intranet.* **Action to close.**
- **Action 138:** The corporate governance manager to communicate the approval of the 2% non-consolidated pay award for the CEO to the senior business partner. *This information was communicated with the senior finance business partner on 21/05/2026.* **Action to close.**

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2. Action required

The board is asked to note the progress against the open actions below.

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Social Work England Board Meeting Action Log

Action no.	Date of Meeting	Action	Owner	Due By	Update	Next review	Status
133	13/03/2026	Executive director, people and business support to ensure ongoing quality assurance for translation services by obtaining feedback from service users to confirm that the service meets their needs, including dialect and cultural appropriateness.	Linda Dale	30/10/2026	The procurement of translation services is taking place currently. This will be addressed as part of ongoing contract management.	30/10/2026	Open
137	15/05/2026	Executive director, professional practice and external engagement to provide chair of the board with copies of communications issued to registered social workers regarding the CPD review for awareness.	Sarah Blackmore	17/07/2026	A new process has been built into the communications plan to ensure that copies of communications issued to registered social workers regarding the CPD review will be shared with the Chair via the Corporate Governance Manager. As the CPD review is ongoing, the action will remain open for the duration of the review.	30/10/2026	Open

Chief executive's report

Agenda Item 05 Paper Ref 03

Paper for the

Social Work England Board

Sponsor

Colum Conway, Chief Executive

Author

Colum Conway

Date

17 July 2026

Reviewed by

Executive Leadership Team

This paper is for

Assurance and Noting

Associated Strategic Objective

SO10: Continually develop and improve how we work, ensuring we are a well-run organisation that delivers the right outcomes and provides value for money.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite

Strategic approach - Open

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

N/A

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1. Introduction

Now that the report from the Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England has been published alongside the government response, we are moving forward on developing a delivery plan for the implementation of the recommendations. As noted in our response we would like to thank all those who contributed to the review and assure them and all those who have an interest in the regulation of the social work profession that we are entirely committed to addressing the issues highlighted in the review and its recommendations.

As an initial response, a brief outline of the delivery plan is included in the pack for this board meeting and a more detailed plan will be available for consideration and agreement at the board strategy meeting on 25 September. The board will see that initial actions include cross referencing the review recommendations with our existing business plan so we can align work that is already underway with the review recommendations and identify gaps that will need further developmental work, including any immediate additional resource implications. While we intend to take a programme management approach to deliver our plan so that clear responsibilities, accountabilities, monitoring and reporting processes are in place specifically for the implementations of the review recommendations. We will also look to align the delivery plan with the ongoing development of our strategic plan (2027/2030) and our business plan for next year (2027/2028).

I appreciate the work of the lead reviewer, Annie Hudson, the review team and the level of engagement with our team at Social Work England throughout the review process. I would also like to acknowledge the work of our team in supporting the review and in particular the leadership provided by Linda Dale our Executive Director for People and Business Support. For me now our focus needs to be on listening and understanding what the review is telling us and making sure we have clear pathway to sustained improvement across the organisation.

2. Quarter 1 business plan performance report

The July board meeting has a focus on the Quarter 1 (Q1) performance report, including the enhanced fitness to practise (FtP) performance report. The executive directors will talk to the report in more detail however just to note from my perspective, the overall positive position against business plan objectives with green RAG rating for the majority of objectives. Performance against KPIs in registration and advice remains strong and we can see sustained improvement in caseload management and timeliness in triage and investigations. Performance in case examination is a result of residual capacity challenges that have now been resolved and therefore performance will improve towards the KPI as the year progresses. Conclusions at the hearings stage are also on target. It is good that we now have

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completed the procurement of 2 external legal providers for FtP and we are working closely with them to maintain and increase momentum to reduce the number of cases awaiting a hearing. Thanks to all colleagues who have taken work forward to deliver this performance for Q1.

Progress on long term financial and workforce planning has not progressed as expected in this quarter. This is an important objective and needs to align with our strategic plan and the development of longer-term sustainable funding models as one of the recommendations arising from the independent review. We will look to recalibrate this objective as it was important in Q1 that we focused our capacity of the finance team on working with the National Audit Office on our external audit and on the completion of our annual report and accounts, which was laid before parliament on the 9 July. Well done to the team, to ARAC and to the board on all the work required to achieve such a tight turn around for our annual report and accounts this year.

It is good to see the progress being made on our digital systems, data quality and security, there are 16 tasks and projects currently under way, most are in the foundational and discovery phase which means it is difficult to ensure they all move at the same pace.

3. Education and training

We are currently consulting on changes to our education and training rules, standards and guidance, and new readiness for professional practice guidance. As well as the usual online survey, we have hosted 4 online events with attendees including course providers, placement co-ordinators, placement providers and practice educators. We have also discussed the proposals with our education and training advisory forum. Prior to the consultation, we spoke with the independent review team and the Department for Education (DfE) on our approach and amended the wording of consultation documents and the Knowledge, Skills and Behaviour statements (KSBs) where appropriate to better align with other national developments.

Feedback to date has been positive and respondents have been broadly supportive of our proposals. The consultations close on 6 August and we hope to publish the outcomes from our consultations in the autumn, to give course providers sufficient time to make any necessary changes to courses before the standards are implemented in autumn 2027. However, this is pending approval of any changes to the standards and rules by the Secretary of State, and we are working with DfE colleagues to ensure this is progressed appropriately when the time comes.

Of concern is a decision to regard postgraduate qualifications delivered as part of the Social Worker Apprenticeship standard (at Level 7) as non-mandatory. This is of real concern given the popularity of the apprenticeship programmes. Education and training providers have

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already recruited to cohorts for September who would be impacted by this decision, and we have approved approximately 14 such programmes. We are exploring with our Education Training Advisory Forum (ETAF), the apprenticeship trailblazer group and other stakeholders, on how best to respond to this decision.

4. Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

While we awaited the outcome of the independent review, work has focused on the internal review of a sample of CPD submissions. Over the last quarter, colleagues from across the organisation have assessed the compliance with our requirements of over 2,000 CPD submissions.

We are moving into the discovery phase of our digital approach to CPD, using what we have learned from others to explore whether and how we might apply AI tools to the compliance and analysis of CPD. We will keep the board apprised of this process.

We have also continued to consider proposals for our requirements around CPD and will test these with the public soon, now that the independent review has been published, in preparation for public consultation later this year.

5. Research

Our Head of Research is now in post, and we are working on staffing our new function and developing our research strategy to align with the work on our strategic plan.

6. AMHP / BIA inspections

We have now concluded our first inspection cycle of both areas of advanced, specialist practice. We are drafting a report for publication to illustrate the learning and analysis from this, including feedback from those involved in the process and other key stakeholders.

7. Referral analysis

Part of the board pack for today’s meeting is a paper on the work we have begun on analysing referrals into our FtP process. We analysed over 500 pre-triage cases from 1 April 2024 to March 2026 to consider why we are experiencing a persistent increase in referrals since

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December 2024. We conducted this research as we wanted to better understand why people are raising concerns.

The research considers who is raising concerns and why, which geographical regions these are from and what referrers expect from a professional regulator. It also explores system wide trends and how media and AI could be influencing referral rates. This is an initial phase of this work, and it will generate further research on the broader context for professional regulation.

8. Recent policy developments

DfE has published an implementation plan outlining how it will deliver major reforms under the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, in the next phase of delivery and building on the Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive strategy.

The plan, Delivering the Children’s Social Care Reset, focuses on earlier intervention, strengthening child protection, and increasing the number of children able to remain in stable family environments. Following on from this publication the department also published the Lead Child Protection Practitioner (LCPP) standards, which are intended to support the knowledge and skills development of LCPPs by setting out the minimum expectations required of those working in this new role. LCPPs, who will be social workers, will sit within multi-agency child protection teams (MACPTs), the implementation of which will become a statutory requirement in 2027.

The Professional Standards Authority’s (PSA) new standards for regulators and accredited registers, initially published in March, have now come into effect. The new standards seek to reflect the modern challenges facing regulators, including changes in technology, workforce pressures, increasing public expectations, and the need for regulation to be transparent, proportionate and focused on public protection. The PSA is planning a workshop for board members on the new standards later this year. We are currently within the PSA audit process but will not be assessed against the new standards for this year.

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9. Annexe

Annex 1: Chief Executive’s meetings

- CEO British Association Social Workers
- Department for Education ALB CEOs
- Joint University Social Work Association Annual Conference
- Lead Reviewer – Independent Review of Social Work Regulation in England
- Chief Executives of Regulated Bodies
- Clear International Congress on Professional and Occupational Regulation
- National Practice Group
- Ofsted External Advisory Group
- Clear International Relations Committee



Responding to the Independent Review of Professional Social Work Regulation

Agenda Item 06 Paper Ref 04

Paper for the

Social Work England Board

Sponsor

The Chair of the Board

Author

Colum Conway, Chief Executive

Date

17 July 2026

Reviewed by

Executive Leadership Team

This paper is for

Discussion and Advising

Associated Strategic Objective

SO10: Continually develop and improve how we work, ensuring we are a well-run organisation that delivers the right outcomes and provides value for money.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite

Strategic approach - Open

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

N/A

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1. Summary

This paper sets out our response to the Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England and advises the board on initial preparations that are being made to implement the recommendations.

2. Action required

For discussion and advising.

3. Commentary

The [review report](#) was published and laid before Parliament on 9 July 2026. A copy of Social Work England's response is at Annexe A. The government's response is published [here](#).

We welcome the review, which recognises the key challenges and achievements of our first six years of operation. It provides welcome clarity about the way professional regulation should be delivered for social work in England, confirming that protecting the public must remain our primary objective. This has guided our work since we were established.

The review represents an important opportunity to further strengthen our regulation and we have accepted the recommendations for Social Work England in full. We are working at pace to develop a clear delivery plan which sets out how these will be implemented, with measurable actions and timescales.

We already have improvement activity underway that directly addresses a number of the review's recommendations. Some recommendations can be progressed immediately; others will require consultation, engagement and in some cases funding decisions or changes to policy, rules or legislation.

Our immediate priority is improving the timeliness of fitness to practise and improving communication with those involved.

Building capacity to deliver:

We will need dedicated programme management capacity to drive forward this significant programme of work and ensure that we communicate effectively with stakeholders about progress. The executive leadership team has approved recruitment to a 12-month, fixed term programme manager position which is currently being recruited. In the interim we have identified internal capacity to provide interim resource to commence this work.

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We have also begun to review and re-prioritise current year business plan objectives and other existing projects, to ensure we can be fully focused on our response to the review. There will not be sufficient organisational capacity to continue all current organisational improvement projects alongside implementation of the review. We will share further information and advice with the board in due course about what we intend to deprioritise and what impact this will have. There may, for example, be some impact on planned work to enhance organisational governance and decision-making processes, improve digital delivery methodologies and mitigate identified corporate risks.

Existing improvement priorities which contribute to review recommendations

A significant amount of work is already underway across the organisation which directly supports delivery of the review recommendations. This work will continue and, where necessary, will be accelerated:

Recommendation 8 (fitness to practise):

- We are implementing identified actions from our recent triage and investigations process review. Temporary resources continue to be in place and recruitment for new permanent resourcing, particularly in the triage service, is underway. Board Paper 14, “Fitness to practise – performance Q1 2026/27”, outlines in more detail the actions that have been started and the difference this is making.
- We are beginning work to bring together our existing improvement plans for fitness to practise and develop an holistic end-to-end strategic improvement plan as recommended by the review. We have arranged an initial meeting with DfE officials on 15 July to discuss and understand government’s delivery expectations. This will explore potential milestones, forecasts, KPIs and methods to track progress and delivery. During July/August, we will be commissioning a suitable external firm or expert to provide support, challenge and ‘validate’ the strategy.

Recommendation 11 (communication):

- We have initiated and scoped a significant project to improve the way we communicate with registrants, complainants, employers and other stakeholders who engage with us. As part of this project, we are exploring external accreditation in customer service excellence. We recognise the importance of a co-production approach and will take this work forward alongside people who have experienced our processes.

Recommendation 4 (continuing professional development):

- We have continued to develop proposals for our requirements in relation to continuing professional development (CPD) and will test these with the public soon,

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now that the independent review has been published, in preparation for public consultation later this year. While we awaited the outcome of the independent review, colleagues from across the organisation assessed the compliance with our requirements of over 2,000 CPD submissions. We are now carrying out a more in-depth qualitative review of a smaller sample of submissions (around 220) to explore some of the key themes in the CPD social workers are recording, which we will share with the sector later in the year. This has also been an opportunity to test our approach to inform the review of CPD submissions for the next renewals cycle from December 2026.

Recommendation 2 (education and training):

- We reviewed and reframed the knowledge, skills and behaviours statements (KSBs) to consider feedback and to more clearly articulate expectations around student outcomes and behaviours, as suggested by the Independent Review. These revised and strengthened KSBs have now been shared with the sector as part of our consultation on our proposed readiness for professional practice guidance and our broader review of education and training standards and rules. As part of this review, we have also sought to streamline and align our standards and guidance to help reduce duplication and complexity for the sector. The consultation concludes in early August, and we will continue to refine our approach based on this feedback from the Independent Review, other national developments, and responses from the sector.

Recommendations 18 & 19 (data):

- We have completed work to identify the digital, data and technology (DDaT) skills and roles that we need to deliver our DDaT strategy. Following this, we have commenced a process to implement phase 1 of the agreed service structure (leadership level roles). The new DDaT leadership structure will be in place on 1 August. When all roles are filled, this will provide additional leadership capacity to progress the improvements we need to make in data collection, data management and data architecture. The new structure includes a dedicated head of data management and insight.
- We have agreed and begun to implement our data governance arrangements, which includes work on data definitions and data dictionaries. A process of data-matching and data-cleansing is also underway to improve the completeness and quality of the data we hold on the initial education and training of registered social workers.

Recommendation 3 (practice education):

- We have already begun an extensive project to consider regulatory and other levers to better support the vital role of practice education, following a survey of our

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register and a programme of national events earlier this year. We are considering mechanisms for improved recognition, quality assurance and strengthening guidance, including commissioning external advice on regulatory levers. Subject to regulatory powers, we intend to consult on a standardised route to practice education qualifications, which will involve the drafting of standards developed in partnership with the sector, within the next 12 months.

Recommendation 5 (student behaviour):

- The introduction of our knowledge, skills and behaviours statements as part of our regulatory framework for inspecting social work courses will provide an important lever for us to better monitor behaviours and students outcomes more comprehensively and consistently. In addition to this, we recognise that more can be done to better understand and analyse broader trends in student fitness to practise concerns so we can support education and training providers to ensure more clarity and a more consistent approach. We are now advancing this as a priority, through our Education and Training Advisory Forum and broader networks, to help inform and shape this work with a view to reporting back by December 2026.

Recommendations 12 & 13 (fitness to practise equalities):

- We have continued to strengthen our evidence base on fitness to practise outcomes, with support from our Data Oversight Group which includes representatives from the General Medical Council, Nursing and Midwifery Council and independent academic advisers. We have updated our analytical methods, exploring a broader range of factors and applying more detailed data analysis techniques. Our next publication is due in the autumn. We are developing a dedicated training programme for all staff and partners involved in fitness to practise, grounded in real casework data and addressing bias across characteristics including race, gender and disability. This will be rolled out from October this year.
- We have shared our fair referral principles directly with employers through our Single Point of Contact network and regional sessions led by our engagement leads. We continue to learn from our joint pilot project with the East Region to understand the lived experience of Black, male, social work practitioners and leaders. All 11 local authorities within the East region have signed up to the Social Care Workforce Race Equality Standard and the pilot is to be extended further in the region. We are now working to secure agreement through principal social worker network to expand the pilot model to other regions across the country.

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Next steps

We are developing a more detailed delivery plan in response to the review. We will be meeting with DfE and DHSC to ensure that we understand government expectations and can fulfil these within the delivery plan. We intend to complete this work during July/August and share the plan with the board at its September strategy awayday.

Over the summer, we will also be establishing programme management arrangements, appointing the new programme manager and setting up internal and board governance.

We will also move into a discovery phase to consider our digital approach to CPD, using what we have learned from other organisations to explore whether and how we might apply AI tools to the compliance and analysis of CPD. We will keep the board apprised of this process.

Board oversight and governance

We expect this to be a standing item on all board meeting agendas for the foreseeable future. We propose there is an initial ‘deep dive’ session at board strategy awayday in September to scrutinise and challenge the delivery plan.

The draft fitness to practise strategy will be brought to the board for scrutiny and challenge at the October meeting.

To ensure transparency, board scrutiny and challenge of the plan and the progress we are making will take place in public board meetings, wherever possible.

4. Conclusions and/or Recommendations

The coming weeks will be a key period in preparing effectively to deliver our response to the review. We will keep the board informed of progress.

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5. Annexes

Annexe 1 - Social Work England response to Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England

Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England

Social Work England response

July 2026

1
2
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4
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7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15

Contents

Contents	8
Introduction	9
Taking action	10
Our response to the recommendations.....	12
Priority recommendations for Social Work England.....	12
Recommendation 8: fitness to practise improvement plan	12
Recommendation 11: communications strategy	12
Recommendation 4: continuing professional development requirements.....	13
Recommendation 2: Knowledge, skills and behaviours and the education and training standards.....	13
Recommendation 18: data collection, governance and validation	14
Priority recommendations for Government	14
Recommendation 1: standards framework	14
Recommendation 9: fitness to practise legislative package	14
Recommendation 14: Social Work England’s remit and core functions.....	15
Further recommendations for Social Work England.....	15
Recommendation 3: standardised route to qualification as a practice educator.....	15
Recommendation 5: student behaviour and reporting fitness to practise concerns	16
Recommendation 12: fitness to practise equalities and employer action	16
Recommendation 13: fitness to practise equalities research and evaluation.....	16
Recommendation 19: data collection, governance and validation	17
Further recommendations for Government.....	18
Recommendation 6: standards architecture and longer-term Social Work England role	18
Recommendation 7: annotation	18
Recommendation 10: referral pathways.....	18
Recommendation 15: Board succession and social work expertise	19
Recommendation 16: Professional Standards Authority information power	19
Recommendation 17: employer standards.....	19
Recommendation 20: sponsorship and joint oversight	20
Recommendation 21: funding certainty and risk tolerance framework.....	20

Next steps.....21

Introduction

On 5 November 2025, the Secretary of State for Education commissioned the statutory independent review of the operation of Part 2 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (the review), including a review of the regulation of the social work profession in England by Social Work England.

We accept the recommendations of the Independent Review of Social Work Professional Regulation in England, published today alongside the Government’s response. We acknowledge the contributions of all those who informed the review process.

We commit to take further action based on the recommendations and our response below details our next steps and approach to each of the recommendations.

Some recommendations can be progressed immediately. Whereas others will require consultation, dialogue and engagement with government, social workers, those who use social work services, employers, education providers and other stakeholders across the profession. Some of the recommendations will require funding decisions, or changes to policy, rules or legislation. Our aim will be to increase momentum, with a continued and relentless focus on achieving our primary objective, which is to protect the public.

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Taking action

The review confirms that the primary role of a regulator is to protect the public. This is our primary objective and has guided our work since we were established. While we have made significant progress since we became the specialist regulator for the social work profession, we are clear about where we must improve further. We will do so working alongside and in partnership with government, social workers, people with lived experience and other key partners.

The review is particularly clear that we must improve the timeliness of our fitness to practise processes and strengthen communication with those involved in them. We understand the real impact that delays and ineffective communication can have on everyone affected, and we are committed to ensuring our processes and communications are timely, compassionate and proportionate — even as the volume of concerns raised with us continues to grow. We are committed to ongoing dialogue, collaboration and engagement with social workers and those who use social work services to ensure we get this right.

We welcome the recommendation for government, working with us and other relevant organisations, to develop a single, clear framework that maps existing standards, clarifies their purpose and explains how they relate to one another. Alongside this, we are working with government and other partners to strengthen education and training across the whole profession and our inspection process, to provide greater clarity about what social work students must cover as part of their training to be able to qualify and apply to join the register. Our consultation on this aspect of our regulation is underway and will conclude by September 2026.

Similarly, a key part of developing future social workers is the role of practice educators. We will work to develop a clear regulatory framework for this important role, building on our engagement with practice educators to date, national organisations and education and training providers. We will strengthen our approach to monitoring practice placements and ensuring that all students have access to the structure and support they need to complete their professional training.

We are mindful of the challenges facing the social work profession and of ensuring that while our regulation is robust and holds social workers to account for meeting the professional standards expected of them, that our approach to this is proportionate. We know that our focus on developing continuing professional development (CPD) over the past year has not been clear and could be strengthened. We will work with government and the sector to address this, with a formal consultation planned by the end of 2026.

As the only organisation with a remit across the whole of the social work profession, we are committed to making better use of the extensive data we hold — to identify trends, inform our decisions and strengthen our regulatory work. We are also investing in the skills and capabilities needed to support this for the future. Separately, our updated analytical methods are deepening our understanding of why certain groups are overrepresented in fitness to practise processes. Addressing these sits at the centre of our equality, diversity and inclusion priorities, and we remain committed to embedding fairness, inclusion and the perspectives of people with lived experience into everything we do.

Finally, we welcome the recommendation on financial clarity outlined in the report to support effective long term planning and delivery to maximise the value we provide.

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Our full response to each recommendation set out in the review can be found below.

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Our response to the recommendations

Recommendations are set out within the independent review report as priority recommendations for Social Work England and for Government, and further recommendations for Social Work England and for Government. We have reflected this order in our response below. They correspond to their numbering within the review and are therefore not sequential.

Priority recommendations for Social Work England

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.

Social Work England response:

We recognise that performance across fitness to practise has been unacceptable, and the impact upon complainants, social workers and others involved in the process. We have been working hard to address this and are starting to see improvements. Our business plan for 2026 to 2027 (objectives 3, 4 and 5) outlines our existing actions and commitments to address this.

In line with this recommendation, by October 2026, we will set out to our board an improvement strategy across all parts of the fitness to practise process. This will include details of the work we have done, are currently doing, and will do into the future, so that the public, social workers and other stakeholders can gain assurance on our plans to improve performance. The strategy will include information on performance; changes to processes; resource requirements and plans for future resourcing; throughput assumptions and key performance indicator (KPI) targets. It will set out how progress against the strategy will be monitored and managed. We will engage with an independent expert on developing this strategy and publish this strategy within the 6-month time period.

Recommendation 11: refreshed 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.
- The wider system: improving transparency about performance, processes, and the organisation's improvement strategy.

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Social Work England response:

We know that there is much to do to strengthen and improve how we communicate with those who are going through our regulatory processes, to ensure that our communication is timely, compassionate, helpful and effective. We have set out in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 ([objective 8](#)) that this will be a significant area of focus for this year and beyond, and we will report to our Board on our progress as we change how we communicate. This work will form part of the fitness to practise improvement strategy set out above, and will build on our approach to dialogue, collaboration and engagement with the social work profession and the public who are at the heart of what we do.

Recommendation 4: continuing professional development requirements

Recommendation:

Social Work England should reform the current approach and processes for CPD requirements, to:

- move from annual CPD requirements to a three-year cycle; and
- include external moderation and meaningful assessment of CPD on the impact on professional practice.

Social Work England response:

This recommendation is timely as we continue to advance our comprehensive review of continuing professional development (CPD), aimed at ensuring our approach is proportionate, evidence-based and focused on achieving meaningful regulatory assurance, as described in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 ([objective 7](#)). Our review of CPD was placed on hold as we awaited the outcomes of the independent review, but we can now advance this in earnest. We will begin pre-consultation activity on potential changes to the CPD model in Autumn 2026, with a view to formal consultation commencing by December this year, and the new model being introduced for the 2027/28 renewal year.

As part of this review, we will explore potential changes to the annual cycle requirements as well as mechanisms to strengthen external moderation and impact on professional practice. This will also include timely links to specialist practice, through CPD.

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 KSB statements before publishing the revised education and training standards (ETS), including clarifying how they should be used for assessing practice placements.

Social Work England response:

We reviewed and reframed the knowledge, skills and behaviours statements (KSBs) to consider feedback and to more clearly articulate expectations around student outcomes and placement assessment. These revised and strengthened KSBs have been shared with the sector as part of our broader consultation on our proposed readiness for professional practice and our review of

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education and training standards and guidance. We will continue to improve and clarify these frameworks in light of any consultation feedback.

This consultation concludes in early August, but over this period, we will consider further how this recommendation will be implemented. We will then work closely with the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care to finalise these key frameworks, which are subject to Secretary of State approval. We intend to bring the new standards and guidance into regulation in time for the next inspection cycle, to commence in Autumn 2027.

Recommendation 18: data collection, governance and validation

Recommendation:

Social Work England should prioritise improvements in data collection, data governance and data validation.

Social Work England response:

We agree that this work should be prioritised. As set out in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 (objective 2), data is a strategic asset that enhances our regulatory work and the value we can bring to the sector. We recognise the need to extend and improve the data we hold, to increase transparency and learning. We have taken important steps towards this by developing our digital, data and technology strategy and delivery roadmap to March 2028. We have also committed to invest in a broader range of data skills and capabilities. This includes a dedicated head of data management and insight.

We will ensure that any improvements that we implement to data collection and processing are both lawful and proportionate.

Priority recommendations for Government

Recommendation 1: standards framework

Recommendation:

Government should create, working with Social Work England and with other relevant organisations, a single, clear framework that maps existing standards, explains their respective functions, their status and how they relate to one another.

Social Work England response:

We welcome the opportunity to support greater clarity and coherence through the development of an overarching regulatory framework for standards and guidance related to initial education and training, in partnership with Government and other relevant organisations.

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

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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.

Social Work England response:

We support the government view and accept in principle that legislative and procedural changes may be needed to support a more effective fitness to practise process. We welcome their prioritisation of further work.

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

Recommendation:

Government should clarify that 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.

Social Work England response:

We agree that it is important that our role and remit should be consistently and clearly articulated in relation to our regulatory functions to ensure it is understood as distinct from professional representation, advocacy and wider sector improvement delivery. All the work we do supports our core regulatory functions and our primary objective of protecting the public. We will work with government, the social work profession and other key partners on clarifying our roles as the regulator of the profession of social work is well defined and reinforced.

Further recommendations for Social Work England

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.

Social Work England response:

Our own research and engagement with the sector have consistently highlighted the need for a more coherent national approach to supporting and recognising practice educators. As highlighted in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 (Objective 9), we are already committed to considering our approach to regulating this vital role, including mechanisms for improved recognition, quality assurance, and strengthening guidance. Subject to regulatory powers, we aim to consult on a

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standardised route to practice education qualifications, which will involve the drafting of standards developed in partnership with the sector, within the next 12 months.

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 (Chapter 2).

Social Work England response:

The introduction of our knowledge, skills and behaviours statements as part of our regulatory framework for inspecting social work courses will provide an important lever for us to monitor behaviour and outcomes more comprehensively and consistently. In addition to this, while our standards and guidance are clear in terms of the responsibility of course providers to manage fitness to practise concerns, we recognise that more can be done to better understand broader trends and foster more consistent approaches. We will work directly with our Education and Training Advisory Forum in the first instance to help inform and shape this work.

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 (Chapter 3).

Social Work England response:

We agree with this recommendation and the importance of increasing the visibility of the work we are doing on equalities. We will review our existing publications and research and seek to build on this through producing enhanced detailed diversity data on our fitness to practise processes and use this evidence to drive change.

We will evaluate our fair referral principles, which were developed with employers, to help make consistent, equitable referral decisions and reduce disproportionality in the system. We will feedback to the sector on how these are working and the efficacy of our single point of contact network. We will continue to monitor through our updated analytical methods why certain groups are overrepresented in our fitness to practise processes, ensuring our response is informed by the most robust data available.

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 (Chapter 3).

Social Work England response:

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We are committed to our work being grounded in robust data and evidence and support this recommendation. Through the data oversight group that we established with representatives from other regulators and independent academic advisors, we will continue to work across regulation and provide technical guidance on the analysis of diversity and fitness to practise data. We will strengthen our evidence base on fitness to practise outcomes through research, and by updating our analytical methods seek to better understand why certain groups are overrepresented in our processes, exploring a broader range of factors and applying more detailed data analysis techniques.

To address how bias and assumptions may affect referral and progression decisions, we have developed fair referral principles to support employers in making consistent, proportionate and equitable decisions, which we are actively embedding across employers through our single point of contact network. We are also developing a dedicated training programme for all staff and partners involved in fitness to practise, grounded in real casework data and addressing potential for bias across characteristics including race, gender and disability — ensuring decisions and outcomes are fair, proportionate and evidence-led.

Recommendation 19: data collection, governance and validation

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; and
- the relationship of the complainant to the registrant (Chapter 4).

Social Work England response:

This recommendation will form part of our ongoing work to improve our collection and use of data, as set out in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 ([objective 2](#)). Data is a strategic asset that enhances our regulatory work and the value we can bring to the sector. We recognise the need to extend and improve the data we hold, to increase transparency and learning. We have taken important steps towards this by developing our digital, data and technology strategy and delivery roadmap to March 2028. We have also committed to invest in a broader range of data skills and capabilities. This includes a dedicated head of data management and insight.

As part of this work, we plan to make significant improvements to data collection and analysis relating to fitness to practise. We agree that this should include the consistent collection and analysis of data relating to representation, education and training background and the relationship of the complainants to the registrant.

We will ensure that any improvements that we implement to data collection and processing are both lawful and proportionate.

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Further recommendations for Government

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 (Chapter 2).

Social Work England response:

There are already significant shifts in the post-qualifying landscape, with the introduction of specialist roles such as the Lead Child Protection Practitioner, enhanced development programmes for early career social workers within children and families, changes to key roles such as the best interests assessor (BIA) and potential introduction of the approved mental capacity professional (AMCP) role within adult social work. Against this background, we would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, and broader partners to build on the overarching framing for initial education and training (as per recommendation 1), to develop a more coherent, profession-wide architecture that speaks to the whole profession. As the only organisation with oversight for the whole profession, we recognise that our own role in the post-qualifying landscape could be extended over time and we would welcome that discussion when appropriate with partners in government, academics and employers.

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 (Chapter 2).

Social Work England response:

The current annotation model, as articulated in our regulatory framework, is a voluntary mechanism and we hold no power to remove a person's annotation. We support the intention to update and improve our annotation approach, which is aligned with our ambition in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 (objective 9). We look forward to working with government to reform the existing system, as part of our commitment to enhancing public protection and recognising the current and future needs of the profession.

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 (Chapter 3).

Social Work England response:

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We support the government view that referral pathways should be considered further and look forward to working with the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) and our fellow health and social care regulators. It is vital that any changes to referral pathways continue to protect the public and maintain public confidence in the profession, and that the regulator is able to independently consider fitness to practise considerations when concerns are raised.

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 about 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 (Chapter 4).

Social Work England response:

We agree with the importance of maintaining the right blend of skills and expertise at board level. It is essential that the board possesses experience of leading organisations successfully (such as financial, commercial, change management and assurance skills), as well as expertise in regulation and both lived and learned experience of social work.

Our board regularly reviews its effectiveness, including board members' collective skills and knowledge. We collaborate closely with the Department for Education to inform board succession planning and enable the public appointments process to target any identified skills gaps. We look forward to strengthening our joint working with the Department for Education to consider further improvements to these existing arrangements.

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 (Chapter 4).

Social Work England response:

We agree that the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) should have appropriate information to fulfil its role. We support the government view that further work is needed to understand this new power and how it interacts with our duties.

Recommendation 17: employer standards

Recommendation:

Government should work with the Local Government Association (LGA) and wider sector to strengthen and embed the employer standards, with a focus on employers' role in regulation (Chapter 4).

Social Work England response:

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We agree with exploring ways in which the employer standards could be strengthened and embedded further. Employers have an important role in professional regulation at a range of levels, through registration, education and training, fitness to practise, continuous professional development and information sharing. We look forward to working with government and other partners and engaging directly with employers on the employer standards.

Recommendation 20: sponsorship and joint oversight

Recommendation:

Government should strengthen sponsorship arrangements through better joint working across the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care, with clearer strategic direction set through joint ` oversight. This should be complemented by greater senior official involvement to reinforce accountability, to support consistent strategic alignment, and to ensure Social Work England has clear expectations from government (Chapter 4).

Social Work England response:

We welcome the recommendation to strengthen sponsorship arrangements and support consistent strategic alignment between the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. We work closely with both departments and stand ready to support the new arrangements. We are committed to working transparently, taking accountability for the efficient and effective delivery of our statutory responsibilities.

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. Government should also include providing Social Work England with an explicit risk-tolerance framework setting out expectations around financial prudence, reserves and forward commitments (Chapter 4).

Social Work England response:

We welcome the opportunity to work with the Department for Education, HM Treasury and other relevant partners to explore how we might achieve earlier and clearer indications of future funding levels and agree tolerances in relation to financial risk. As outlined in our business plan for 2026 to 2027 ([Objective 1](#)), greater financial clarity and certainty will enable more effective and longer-term operational planning and delivery. It will assist us to make full use of the resources available, helping us to maximise value for money and the impact of our regulation for public protection.

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Next steps

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 review reinforces our role and primary objective which is to protect the public, and this is an opportunity for us to now focus on what more needs to be done, transparently, at pace, and in partnership.

Our next steps are to finalise and publish a clear delivery plan setting out how the recommendations of the independent review will be implemented, alongside measurable actions and timelines. Delivery of the plan will be shaped through ongoing engagement with government, social workers, key stakeholders and critically people with lived experience. This insight will inform the future development of this work and our regulation. We are committed to reporting on the progress we make, and will provide regular updates to ensure transparency, accountability and measurable impact.

Our focus going forward will be to ensure that our regulation supports public protection, public confidence and clear professional standards, and that the response to this review leads to practical and sustained improvement.

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Social Work England

Quarterly performance report

Q1 April – June 2026



1
2
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5
6
7
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11
...

Table of contents

Performance report

Executive summary	4
Business plan update	6
Business plan progress overview	7
Strategic alignment: Delivery and improvement	
Objective 1: Building a sustainable financial and workforce plan	9
Objective 2: Improving our digital systems, data quality and security	10
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection	
Objective 3: Improving the way concerns are triaged so that decisions are timely and proportionate	11
Objective 4: Strengthening capacity and consistency across investigations and case examination	12
Objective 5: Reducing the backlog after case examination and improving case timeliness	13
Strategic alignment: Prevention and impact	
Objective 6: Building our research function to strengthen evidence and insight	14
Objective 7: Building the evidence base for the future of continuing professional development	15
Objective 8: Strengthening our engagement with social workers, employers and the sector	16
Objective 9: Shaping the future of specialist and advanced social work practice	17
Objective 10: Improving social work education and strengthening our quality assurance processes	18

Table of contents

Performance report

Performance update	19
KPI performance overview	20
Strategic alignment: Prevention and Impact	
Education	22
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection	
Registration	23
Fitness to practise	25
Strategic alignment: Delivery and improvement	
Information governance	28
Corporate complaints	29
People	30
Finance	31
Technology	32
Annex A: Performance data	33
Annex B: Course approval and reapproval decisions	46

Executive summary



1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
...

Executive summary

Business plan progress

We have undertaken foundational work on the people and finance data and reporting project, although progress has been delayed due to resourcing challenges in the relevant teams. Work to deliver longer-term financial and workforce plans will start in Q2. Objective 1 has been rated as amber/red.

We have completed the re-procurement of external legal services, with 2 providers procured.

We have launched the education and training consultation on our rules, standards and guidance, and new readiness for professional practice guidance.

We have implemented a revised forecasting model to plan and deliver triage resourcing requirements.

We approved a plan for restructuring the triage and investigations functions in May.

We began our internal review of CPD compliance, reviewing over 2,000 CPD submissions and designing an additional qualitative review process.

We closed the social worker survey in June in which we received over 5,000 responses. Analysis is now underway.

Performance update

We achieved 15 of our 18 KPIs

We have not met the financial KPI (FIN1). The budget plan for 2026/27 approved by the board responds to operational pressures and proactively mitigates against the risk of underspend arising during the year. It is higher than the settlement confirmed by DfE in April 2026. We are currently working to the higher, 'at risk' budget and tracking performance against the DfE budget. Conversations with the DfE continue regarding the management of this situation. Adjustments to budget and/or expenditure are expected to be made throughout the year based on financial performance.

The time taken to complete triage and investigation stages of FtP was within our KPI targets. In Q1 we concluded more than twice the number of cases at triage than the same period last year. The time taken to complete investigations is below projections, but the number of investigations increasing.

We did not meet the 2 KPIs measured at case examination. Based on projections we anticipate that the average time taken will start to reduce from Q2.

Business plan update



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Business plan progress overview

Business plan progress

ID	Business plan objective	RAG
Strategic alignment: Delivery and improvement		
1	Building a sustainable financial and workforce plan	
2	Improving our digital systems, data quality and security	
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection		
3	Improving the way concerns are triaged so that decisions are timely and proportionate	
4	Strengthening capacity and consistency across investigations and case examination	
5	Reducing the backlog after case examination and improving case timeliness	

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ID	Business plan objective description	RAG
Strategic alignment: Prevention and impact		
6	Building our research function to strengthen evidence and insight	
7	Building the evidence base for the future of continuing professional development	
8	Strengthening our engagement with social workers, employers and the sector	
9	Shaping the future of specialist and advanced social work practice	
10	Improving social work education and strengthening our quality assurance processes	

Strategic alignment: Delivery and improvement

Business plan progress

Objective 1:

Building a sustainable financial and workforce plan

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG				

Activity and assurance

People and finance data and reporting:

- We have undertaken some initial scoping of the improvements required to data and reporting. This has identified the core challenges around data quality, reporting consistency, manual effort and subject matter expert capacity.
- Further progress on this project has been delayed due to resourcing challenges in the people and finance teams during Q1. We will assess in Q2 whether all planned timescales and deliverables remain achievable within current capacity.

Longer-term financial and workforce planning:

- Our project to develop long-term financial and workforce planning has not yet started in earnest, for similar reasons. We have begun to scope activity, dependencies and key stakeholders.
- The Board can be assured that this work remains a priority, with further development of longer-term financial and workforce planning to progress during 2026/27.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

Capacity challenges mean there is a risk that deliverables for the data and reporting project may slip.

Outcome and impact

- No evidence of impact as we are still at the scoping stage.
- Q1 activity has clarified the scale of the work required to deliver reliable people and finance insight.

Key planned activity next quarter

- A review of capacity and dependencies will take place in July to confirm whether the current delivery timetable for the data and reporting project remains achievable or whether further prioritisation may be required (or commissioning of external support, subject to budget availability).
- We will prioritise work on staffing establishment data and reporting, associated process improvements and data quality issues, and the development of a data governance business glossary.
- We will focus on setting clear milestones and ownership for the longer-term financial and workforce planning work, including the practical process and tools needed to support delivery.

Objective 2:

Improving our digital systems, data quality and security

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG				

Activity and assurance

- We completed our review of the skills and roles that we need to deliver our DDaT strategy. The executive leadership team agreed a future workforce structure which we will now start to implement. This includes a permanent assistant director with responsibility for DDaT and a dedicated head of data. It brings all DDaT functions into the same line management structure.
- We approved our data governance approach in June, and work is underway to apply data governance to registration, people and finance data.
- We commenced a project to review the access policy for our case management system, and to identify appropriate mechanisms to enhance security. Another project is also underway to review the current authentication for Social Work England online accounts and to identify a more robust mechanism to secure them.
- Our DDaT programme continues to deliver a range of initiatives to improve our services and digital maturity, with 16 tasks and projects currently in progress.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

The work required in Q1 to deliver our annual report alongside support for the independent review has impacted capacity. Data architecture discovery work was planned but has not yet commenced.

Outcome and impact

Much of the work currently being delivered is foundational or in discovery, so it is too early to report impact.

Key planned activity next quarter

- We will implement phase 1 of our new DDaT structure.
- We will apply data governance to the pilot domains, with associated communications and training.
- Data architecture discovery work will begin, exploring and testing how to implement a single data layer, to help maximise the value of the information we hold.
- We will develop delivery plans to implement security controls within our case management system and for authentication of online accounts
- We will re-prioritise our delivery roadmap for data improvements, in light of the Independent Review.

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Objective 3:

Improving the way concerns are triaged so that decisions are timely and proportionate

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG	GREEN			

Activity and assurance

- We approved the outcomes of the process review project in May, and we have established the implementation project
- We have implemented a revised forecasting model to plan and deliver triage resourcing requirements.
- We approved a plan for restructuring the triage service in May, with detailed proposals for the first recruitment phase also approved in June.
- We are utilising temporary additional resource to support the triage function, alongside the implementation of new ways of working.
- We have completed in-house research on increased referrals and that has been presented to ELT.

Outcome and impact

- The additional resourcing and new ways of working have led to an increase in decisions made between April – June 2026, when compared to the previous year.
- The number of triage closures in each month of Q1 have surpassed the number of new referrals – meaning that the overall caseload has reduced each month.

Key planned activity next quarter

- We will begin phase 1 of recruitment into the new triage structure, including recruitment of additional legal support.
- We will commence further actions from the process review, including developing new training & guidance; and developing plans for further piloting of new ways of working.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

Performance in 2026/27 is dependent on successful recruitment into new roles – particularly Triage Case Officer posts.

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Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection

Business plan progress

Objective 4:

Strengthening capacity and consistency across investigations and case examination

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG	GREEN			

Activity and assurance

- We approved the outcomes of the process review project in May, and we have established the implementation project.
- We approved plans for restructuring the investigations service in May, with detailed proposals for the first phase approved in June.
- We are learning from the monthly reviews of adjournments produced by case examiners.
- The new cohort of case examiners have now begun making decisions.

Outcome and impact

The increase in the case examiner establishment has led to increased decision making in the quarter. We made 21% more decisions during Q1 2026/27 than in the same period last year.

Key planned activity next quarter

- We will begin phase 1 of the recruitment into the new investigations structure.
- We will make a decision on the options for strengthening case examiner resilience.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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Objective 5:
Reducing the backlog after case examination and improving case timeliness

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG	GREEN			

Activity and assurance

- We have completed the re-procurement of external legal services, with 2 providers procured.
- So far this year we have 69 cases scheduled with further 100+ identified for listing.

Outcome and impact

Additional external legal provision will assist in delivering increased throughput of cases to conclusion at hearing. At this stage in the year, we expect that the procurement will allow us to achieve current plans.

Key planned activity next quarter

We are working towards the new contracts for external legal providers starting in August 2026. We will onboard the new external legal supplier and expect them to be allocated cases from 1 September 2026.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

Increase in throughput due to procurement of additional legal services will be affected by speed of onboarding providers.

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Strategic alignment: Prevention and impact

Business plan progress

Objective 6:

Building our research function to strengthen evidence and insight

Quarter

Q1

Q2

Q3

Q4

RAG

GREEN

Activity and assurance

- The new head of research joined the organisation, and the recruitment process for the new research manager and research officer roles will commence imminently.
- We published our research into seriousness in FtP.
- We finalised the reports from 2 independent rapid evidence reviews into student experiences on placement and practice educator assessments.
- We provided a summary to the board of the findings from our internal FtP referrals research.
- We commissioned an external provider to deliver a piece of independent research on placement quality and sufficiency.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

Outcome and impact

- Our research into referrals has had a positive impact on the organisation and board’s knowledge around reasons for referrals.
- The establishment of a dedicated research function will enable us to delve more deeply into our operations, to better understand and improve our regulation. It will also further our ambitions to drive social care research across the sector.

Key planned activity next quarter

- We will recruit the new research manager and officer roles and complete the transition of research out of the policy team into a standalone function.
- We will finalise our first research strategy.
- We will share the findings from the FtP referrals research at the public board in July.
- We will commence the placements research, working with the external provider in an advisory capacity.
- We will secure sign off and consider the publication of the 2 rapid evidence reviews in practice education.
- We will determine our next steps for seriousness and referrals in FtP.

Objective 7:

Building the evidence base for the future of continuing professional development

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG	GREEN			

Activity and assurance

- We designed, implemented and commenced our internal review of CPD compliance, undertaking a check of over 2,000 CPD submissions.
- We designed the qualitative review process for a smaller sample of submissions.
- We are considering proposals for changes to our CPD model.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

Outcome and impact

The information gathered through the internal CPD review, both from the analysis of the submissions and the process to review itself, will be helpful in informing our approach to the formal review in December.

Key planned activity next quarter

- We will complete the internal review of CPD submissions and analyse the results.
- We will use the findings from the internal review to confirm our approach to the formal CPD review to be carried out in December 2026.
- We will commence the discovery phase for the use of emerging tech to analyse CPD submissions.
- We will continue to advance our proposals for changes to our CPD model in preparation for consultation.

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Strategic alignment: Prevention and impact

Business plan progress

Objective 8:				
Strengthening our engagement with social workers, employers and the sector				
RAG				
				
Activity and assurance		Outcome and impact		
- We completed our evaluation of Social Work Week 2026. A report will be submitted to the board in July 2026. - We assessed a sample of historical interactions with members of the SPOC network to assess the quality of engagement. Work is now underway to prioritise target areas for development. - We launched our social worker survey which received over 5,000 responses. Analysis is now underway. - We completed scoping of the customer engagement project to improve communication with individuals engaged in regulatory processes. - We undertook scoping work to assess our relationships and engagement with Higher Education Institutions. A working group will commence in July 2026. The aim is to guide and prioritise activity to engage more strategically with students and build a deeper understanding of our role and the importance of being a regulated profession.		- We have enhanced our understanding of relationships and engagement with HEIs to inform targeted activity in support of this objective. - Both Social Work Week and Change the Script have strengthened trust and confidence in social work by engaging thousands across the sector and increasing the profession’s visibility positively.		
Changes to risk, any further concerns		Key planned activity next quarter		
No change.		- We will continue to progress workstreams on strategic engagement with our audiences, with intentional communications and engagement activity aligned to relevant moments (e.g., during registration renewal) and supporting us to build a deeper understanding of our role. - We will advance the analysis of social worker survey responses and learnings for the organisation and our approach. - We will initiate workstreams on the customer engagement project		

Strategic alignment: Prevention and impact

Business plan progress

Objective 9:

Shaping the future of specialist and advanced social work practice

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG	GREEN			

Activity and assurance

- We undertook the final AMHP reapproval inspection. In total we have completed 12 inspections for 14 courses.
- We completed a report that sets out our learning from the information gathering stage of our practice education work. We have also secured dedicated legal resource to support the work.
- We have sought external legal advice on what our rules and regulations enable us to do in relation to specialist regulation, including education quality assurance of courses.
- We have reviewed the professional recognition options appraisal received from GMC Services International (GMCSI).

Outcome and impact

- All existing AMHP courses have now undergone reapproval activity giving us a clearer picture of the AMHP landscape.
- The work we’re doing around practice education is informing our broader approach to specialist regulation of other roles.

Key planned activity next quarter

- We will publish the learning report from the first phase of our practice education work.
- We will identify the changes we may want to consider making to our frameworks, to improve our annotation systems, as well as exploring our options for quality assurance of specialist practice.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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Objective 10:
Improving social work education and strengthening our quality assurance processes

Quarter	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
RAG	GREEN			

Activity and assurance

- We are drafting an external report, reflecting on the learning from the first AMHP and BIA inspection cycle, including stakeholder feedback.
- We are finalising a report summarising this year's annual monitoring return.
- We launched a consultation on the education and training rules, standards and guidance, and new readiness for professional practice guidance.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

Ongoing changes in the political space may impact our ability to secure Secretary of State sign off.

Outcome and impact

- The outcomes from annual monitoring activity and reflections will strengthen our future approach and data collection.
- In response to our learning, we are making changes to our education and training framework that will drive improvements in social work education and training.

Key planned activity next quarter

- Input and contribution to key projects which include the education and training standards consultation and reapproval, practice education, and engagement.
- We will complete the consultation events for education and training.
- We will analyse the responses to the consultation and use it to make final amendments to our rules, standards and guidance.
- We will submit the final versions of our rules, standards and guidance to the DfE for approval.

Performance update



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ID	KPI	Target	RAG
EQA1	Time taken from end of course inspection to regulator decision	≤ 60 working days (median)	44
REG1	Time taken to approve UK registration applications	≤ 10 working days (median)	2
REG2	Time taken to approve restoration applications	≤ 10 working days (median)	2
REG3	Time taken to answer emails	≤ 5 working days (median)	1
REG4	Time taken to answer phone calls	≤ 8 minutes (median)	2
FTP1	Time taken to complete triage	≤ 26 weeks (median)	24
FTP2	Time taken to conclude investigation	≤ 54 weeks (median)	45
FTP3	Time taken to complete case examination process	≤ 12 weeks (median)	27
FTP4	Time from receipt of concern to final fitness to practise outcome at case examination	≤ 92 weeks (median)	125

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KPI performance overview

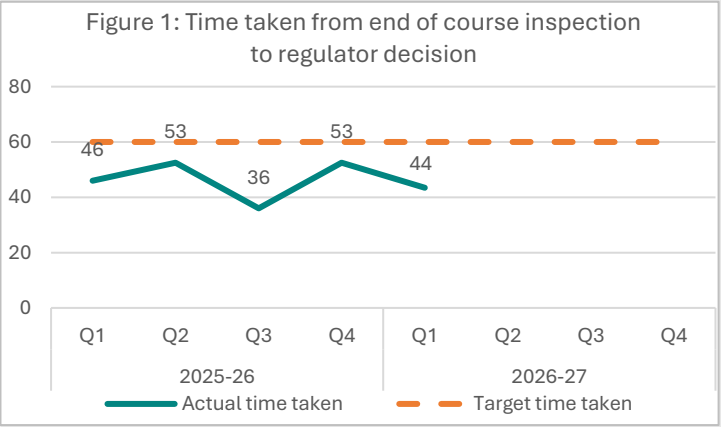
Performance update

ID	KPI description	Target	RAG
FTP5	Time from receipt of concern to final fitness to practise outcome at hearing	To monitor - (median weeks)	225
FTP6	Time taken to approve interim orders	≤ 20 working days (median)	19
IG1	Time taken to complete FOI requests	≥ 90% within statutory deadline	100%
IG2	Time taken to complete subject access requests	≥ 90% within statutory deadline	100%
C1	Corporate complaints response time	≥ 80% within 20 working days	100%
P1	Retention rate	≥ 85%	90%
P2	Sickness absence over last 12 months	≤ 8.2 days per person	7.2
FIN1	Forecast year-end variance to budget	+/- 1.5%	+20.5%
IT1	System availability excluding planned outages	≥ 99%	100%

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EQA1: Time taken from end of course inspection to regulator decision

Target: ≤ 60 working days (median)



Commentary

- Target met.
- This is based on 14 inspection decisions. All courses were either approved or approved with conditions.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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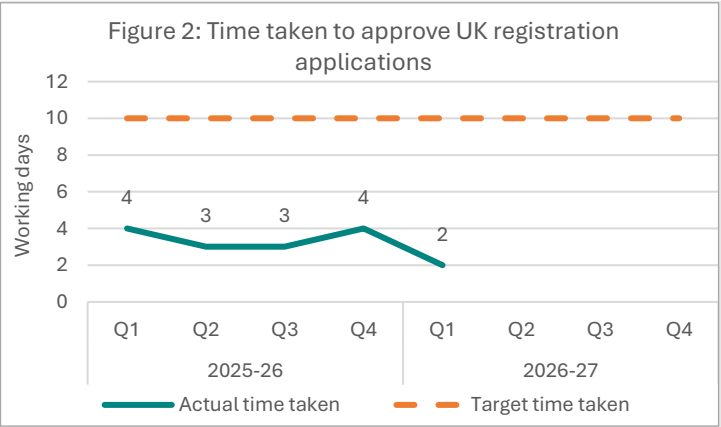
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection

Registration - Applications

Performance update

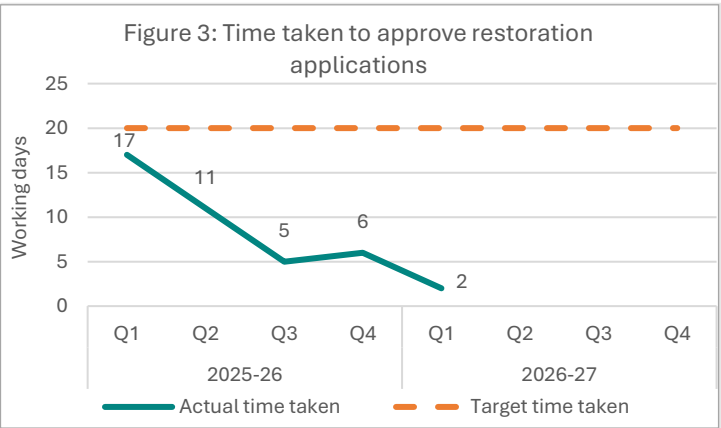
REG1: Time taken to approve UK registration applications

Target: ≤ 10 working days (median)



REG2: Time taken to approve restoration applications

Target: ≤ 10 working days (median)



Commentary

- Targets met.
- The registration team are preparing for increased volumes of UK applications during Q2 and Q3 as students complete their courses.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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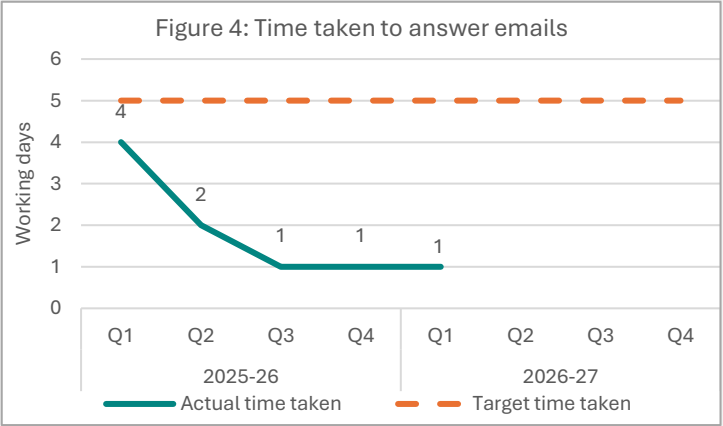
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection

Registration - Contacts

Performance update

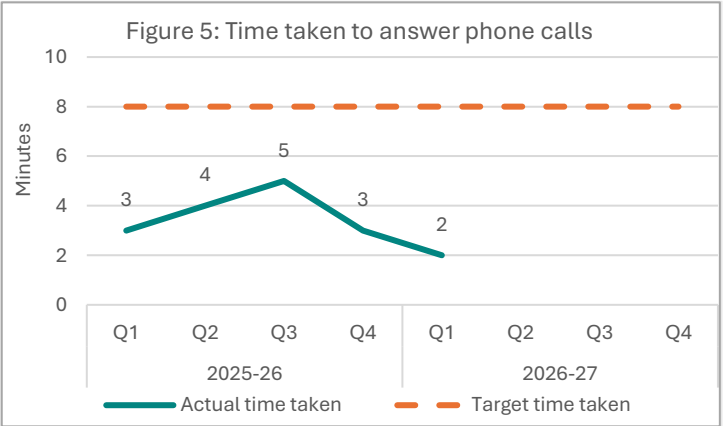
REG3: Time taken to answer emails

Target: ≤ 5 working days (median)



REG4: Time taken to answer phone calls

Target: ≤ 8 minutes (median)



Commentary

- Targets met.
- The registration team is preparing for an increased volume of enquiries during the renewals period (September to November). Recruitment of additional resource to support renewals is on track.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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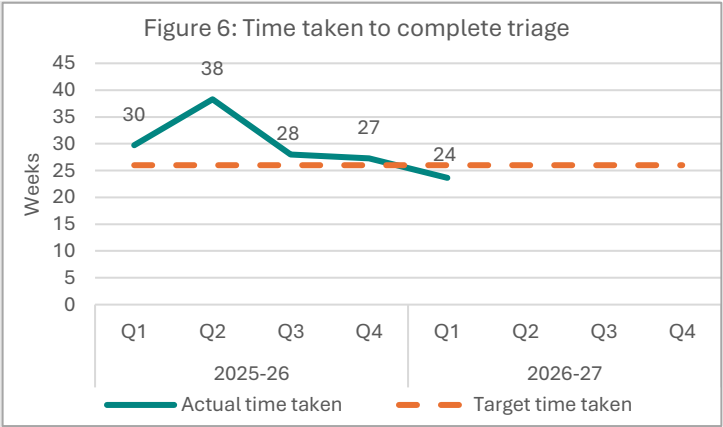
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection

Fitness to Practise – Triage and investigation

Performance update

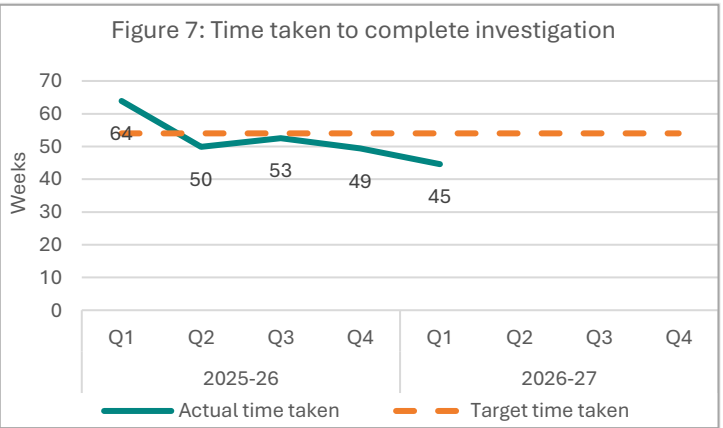
FTP1: Time taken to complete triage

Target: ≤ 26 weeks (median)



FTP2: Time taken to complete investigation

Target: ≤ 54 weeks (median)



Commentary

- Targets met.
- Timeliness in triage continues to be impacted by the high number of referrals and will be volatile until the backlog is reduced. However, in Q1 we are consistently concluding higher numbers of triage cases than in 2025/26 and have met the timeliness target.
- We are meeting timeliness targets in investigations, with the time taken tracking lower than projected.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

- Resourcing remains a challenge in triage – with plans in place to recruit additional Triage Case Officers during Q2.
- The number of cases within investigations is starting to increase and is projected to increase further through the year. We need to ensure that investigations resourcing corresponds to this increase.

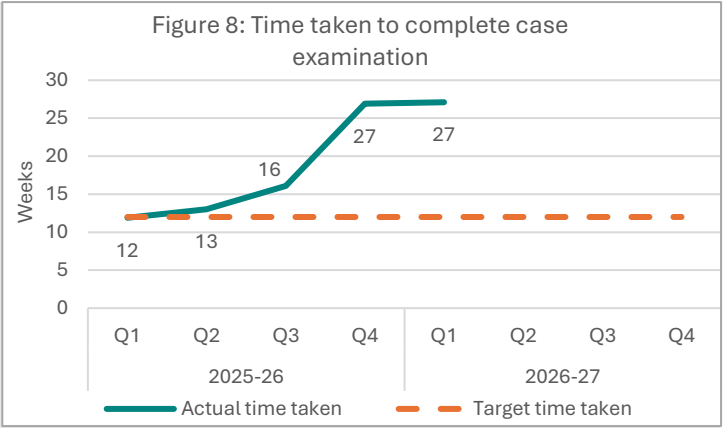
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection

Fitness to Practise – Case examination

Performance update

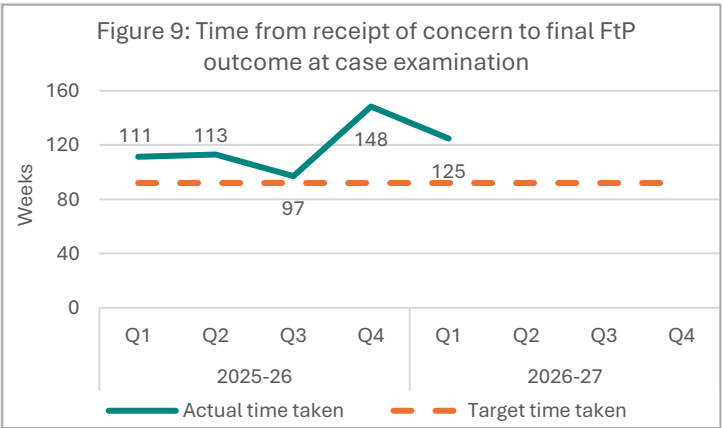
FTP3: Time taken to complete case examination

Target: ≤ 12 weeks (median)



FTP4: Time from receipt of concern to outcome at case examination

Target: ≤ 92 weeks (median)



Commentary

- Targets not met.
- The forecast for completion of case examinations in Q1 was at 27 weeks. We anticipate that the KPI will start to reduce from Q2 onwards.
- We continue to allocate cases based on age and risk, and the case load is starting to reduce. We continue to review adjournments to identify further opportunities for improvement.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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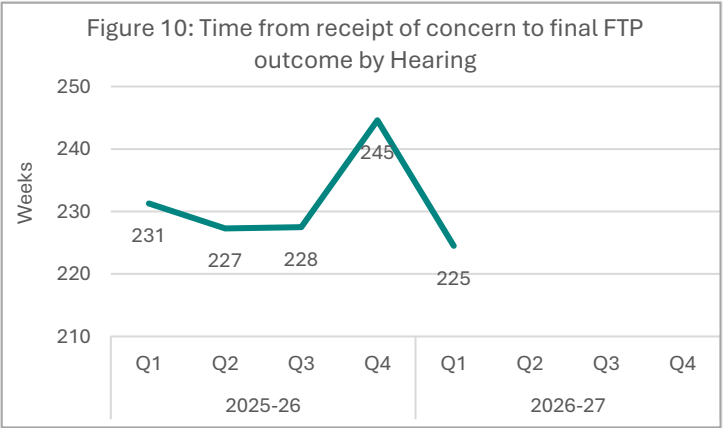
Strategic alignment: Regulation and protection

Fitness to Practise – Hearings

Performance update

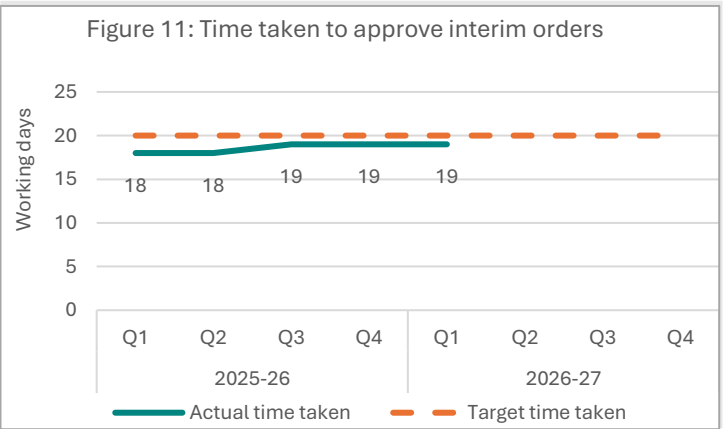
FTP5: Time from receipt of referral to final fitness to practise outcome at hearing

Monitor – no target



FTP6: Time taken to approve interim orders

Target: ≤ 20 working (median)



Commentary

- Targets met.
- We continue to work with our external legal provider to optimise the number of cases that can be listed for a hearing this year.
- We continue to monitor the time taken from receipt of concern to the outcome at hearing stage. Timeliness will continue to be affected by the backlog of cases awaiting conclusion at this stage.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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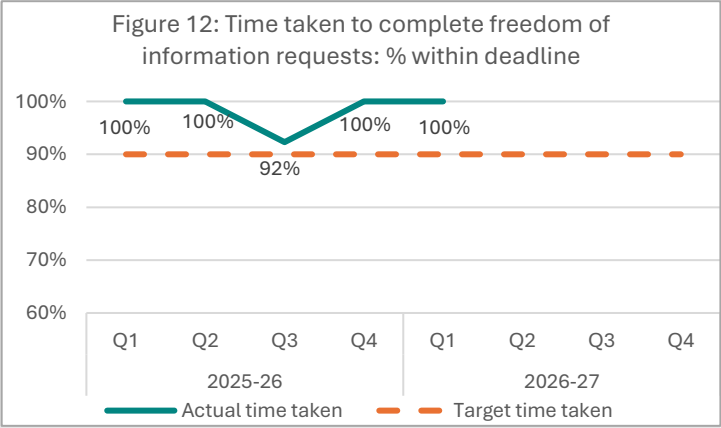
Strategic alignment: Delivery and improvement

Information governance

Performance update

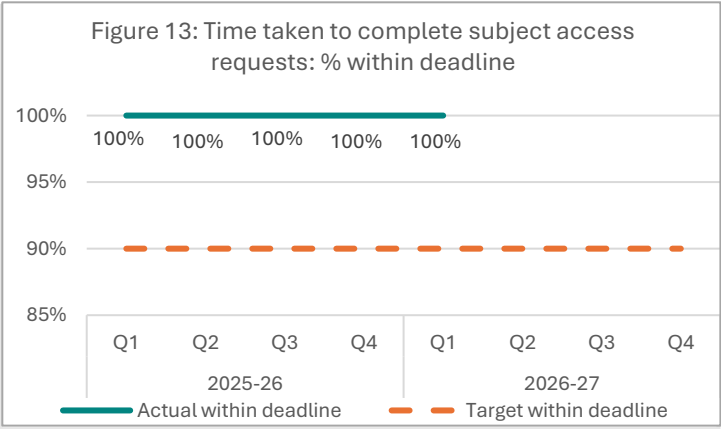
IG1: Time taken to complete freedom of information requests

Target: ≥ 90% within deadline



IG2: Time taken to complete subject access requests

Target: ≥ 90% within deadline



Commentary

Targets met.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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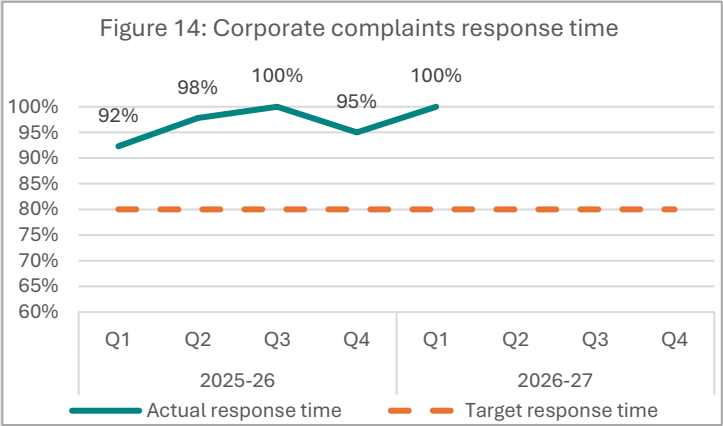
Strategic alignment: Delivery and improvement

Corporate complaints

Performance update

C1: Corporate complaints response time

Target: ≥ 80% within 20 working days



Commentary

Target met.

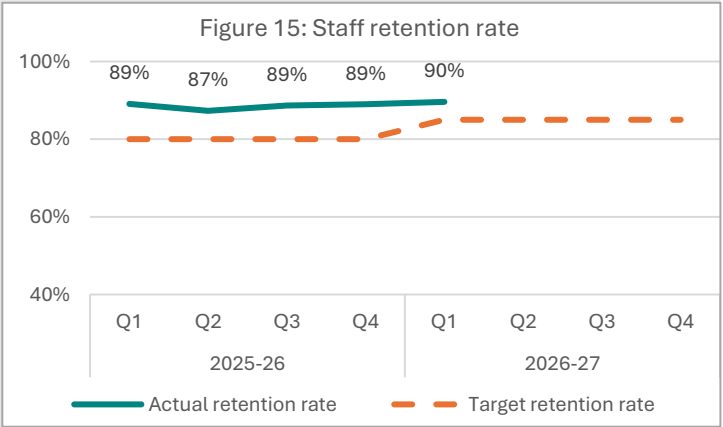
Changes to risk, any further concerns

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P1: Staff retention rate

Target: $\geq 85\%$

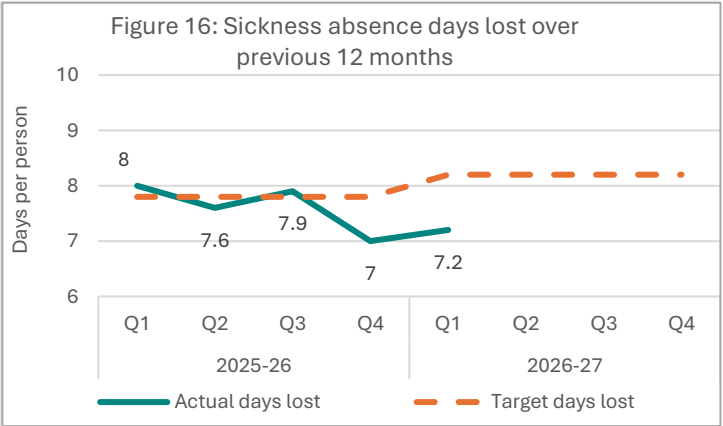


Commentary

Targets met.

P2: Days lost in sickness absence over last 12 months

Target: 8.2 days per person

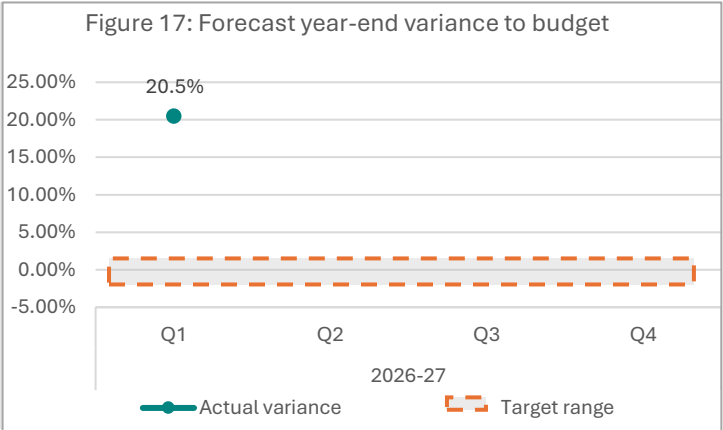


Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

FIN1: Forecast year-end variance to budget

Target: +/- 1.5%



Commentary

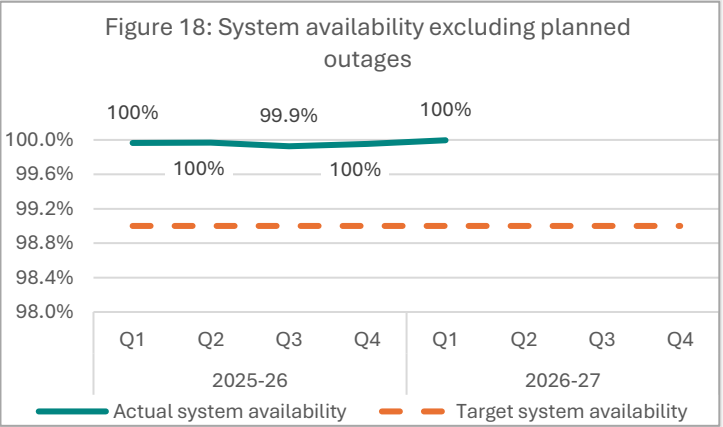
- The KPI target has not been achieved and we are currently forecasting a 20.5% adverse variance at the end of Q4 2026/27. The Q1 board finance report shows a year to date overspend of 6%
- The budget plan for 2026/27, approved by the board, responds to current operational pressures. The budget has been set on a prudent basis, with active monitoring of delivery, expenditure profiles and emerging risks throughout the year. The budget set by the board is therefore higher than the settlement confirmed by DfE in April 2026. We are currently working to the higher, 'at risk' budget and tracking performance against the DfE budget. DfE are aware of this approach and conversations continue regarding the management of this situation. Adjustments to budget and/or expenditure are expected to be made throughout the year based on financial performance.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

There is a significant risk regarding this budget position if DfE is unable to grant further funding. Conversations to resolve the pressure continue. In the meantime, Social Work England is continuing to commit expenditure against the higher budget and report against the lower budget figure.

IT1: System availability excluding planned outages

Target: $\geq 99\%$



Commentary

- Target met.
- System performance and availability continues to be monitored to ensure public and internal digital services are available 24x7x365.

Changes to risk, any further concerns

No change.

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Annex A

Q1 2026-27 performance data



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Education and training

Performance data

Education and training		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Median time taken from end of course inspection to regulator decision (working days)	2026-27	45	45	37									
	2025-26	N/A	38	54	47	47	58	34	36	46	56	42	52
Time taken for report to be written and agreed after inspection end date	2026-27	29	29	26									
	2025-26	N/A	25	30	28	35	26	25	29	29	31	30	24
Time taken for the regulator decision after final report sent to regulator	2026-27	4	6	2									
	2025-26	N/A	3	14	6	7	14	4	4	9	18	5	12
Number of course inspections decisions made	2026-27	5	6	3									
	2025-26	0	7	5	3	1	2	2	2	3	2	3	5
Number of BIA reapprovals decisions made	2026-27	4	2	0									
	2025-26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	5
Number of AMHP reapprovals decisions made	2026-27	0	2	3									
	2025-26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Number of approvals decisions made (including AMHP & BIA approvals)	2026-27	1	2	0									
	2025-26	0	7	5	3	1	2	2	2	2	0	2	0

Registration

Performance data

Registration			Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Number of registered social workers		2026-27	106,599	106,701	106,759										
		2025-26	105,007	105,337	105,454	106,294	107,070	108,088	108,406	107,741	105,590	105,982	106,317	106,521	
Number of social workers joining the register		2026-27	213	152	223										
		2025-26	275	380	280	888	856	1,188	640	379	621	411	356	290	
Number of social workers leaving the register		2026-27	130	49	157										
		2025-26	123	49	161	42	76	169	320	1,063	2,773	19	18	85	
Number of new registration applications received		All applications	2026-27	196	158	434									
			2025-26	349	457	521	1,230	1,226	1,352	605	594	219	406	286	270
		UK graduates	2026-27	139	101	370									
			2025-26	235	338	413	1,104	1,125	1,233	507	463	170	341	227	187
		Overseas graduates	2026-27	57	57	64									
			2025-26	114	119	108	126	101	119	98	131	49	65	59	83
Median time taken to approve registration applications (working days)		All applications	2026-27	4	6	2									
			2025-26	5	4	4	2	3	3	4	4	8	7	6	5
		UK graduates	2026-27	3	2	1									
			2025-26	5	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	6	5	5	3
		Overseas graduates	2026-27	24	16	16									
			2025-26	12	20	17	21	19	20	21	22	23	21	23	21
Number of restoration applications received		2026-27	56	46	53										
		2025-26	57	42	52	70	71	59	58	77	528	88	74	86	

Registration

Performance data

Registration		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Median time taken to approve restoration applications (working days)	2026-27	5	3	2									
	2025-26	15	18	15	10	14	11	9	4	5	7	6	5
Number of misuse of title cases opened	2026-27	10	4	5									
	2025-26	17	11	7	5	7	5	10	8	20	15	2	8
Number of misuse of title cases closed	2026-27	5	5	9									
	2025-26	24	22	19	20	7	13	3	6	30	20	12	12
Median time taken to conclude misuse of title cases (working days)	2026-27	17	41	16									
	2025-26	22	14	12	24	58	9	22	20	0	6	33	41
Number of phone calls received	2026-27	1,060	940	1,062									
	2025-26	1,314	1,309	1,359	1,752	1,571	2,630	2,866	4,760	3,346	1,464	1,178	1,272
Median time taken to answer phone calls (minutes)	2026-27	2	2	3									
	2025-26	4	2	3	3	3	7	8	3	9	4	3	2
Number of emails received	2026-27	1,987	1,654	1,710									
	2025-26	2,438	2,404	2,380	2,611	2,915	4,215	3,966	5,052	4,039	3,263	2,241	2,312
Median time taken to answer emails (working days)	2026-27	2	1	1									
	2025-26	3	2	7	3	2	2	3	1	1	1	1	1

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Continued professional development

Performance data

Continued professional development		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Percentage of social workers that have submitted at least one piece of CPD	2026-27	3%	4%	6%									
	2025-26	3%	4%	5%	7%	8%	16%	33%	96%	0.3%	1%	2%	3%
Percentage of social workers meeting all CPD requirements	2026-27	1%	2%	2%									
	2025-26	1%	1%	2%	3%	4%	11%	26%	95%	0.05%	0.2%	0.5%	1%

Fitness to practise - triage

Performance data

Fitness to practise – triage		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Number of concerns received	2026-27	231	259	245									
	2025-26	193	184	210	250	211	194	233	204	237	252	242	260
Median time taken to complete triage (weeks)	2026-27	30	25	13									
	2025-26	25	31	31	37	42	35	33	25	17	36	31	23
Number of open triage cases	2026-27	2,341	2,260	2,172									
	2025-26	1,907	1,926	1,993	2,083	2,128	2,134	2,215	2,254	2,380	2,448	2,481	2,424
Median time open cases have spent in triage (weeks)	2026-27	25	25	27									
	2025-26	25	26	25	24	22	22	22	23	24	25	25	25
Number of decisions made at triage	2026-27	344	355	362									
	2025-26	187	179	148	175	173	205	182	176	128	201	226	349
Percentage of cases closed at triage	2026-27	84%	86%	88%									
	2025-26	87%	80%	79%	87%	82%	86%	82%	86%	78%	82%	89%	86%
Percentage of cases progressed to investigation	2026-27	16%	14%	12%									
	2025-26	13%	20%	21%	13%	18%	14%	18%	14%	22%	18%	11%	14%

Fitness to practise - investigation

Performance data

Fitness to practise - investigation		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Median time taken to complete investigation (weeks) ¹	2026-27	42	43	60									
	2025-26	64	59	64	50	51	52	68	36	40	39	46	75
Number of cases into investigation (including adjournments)	2026-27	63	63	53									
	2025-26	29	40	34	33	35	37	45	29	33	40	33	57
Number of open investigation cases	2026-27	516	552	567									
	2025-26	464	460	441	434	430	434	438	443	436	440	446	480
Median time open cases have spent in investigation (weeks)	2026-27	35	33	32									
	2025-26	55	53	47	46	45	44	37	38	39	38	39	38
Number of concluded investigation cases	2026-27	25	27	38									
	2025-26	35	42	53	40	38	33	40	24	40	36	27	23

¹ There are some changes to previously published figures for 2025/26. This is due to retrospective changes being captured on the system after the data had been compiled and reported. Previously we reported May 2025 (57), August 2025 (50) and September 2025 (51)

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Fitness to practise – case examiner

Performance data

Fitness to practise – case examiner		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Median time taken to complete case examination (weeks)	2026-27	32	23	27									
	2025-26	12	11	13	7	13	14	16	14	17	26	27	27
Number of cases into case examination (including adjournments)	2026-27	26	24	39									
	2025-26	39	43	53	41	40	32	43	22	37	35	27	22
Number of open case examination cases	2026-27	157	147	127									
	2025-26	80	101	120	119	130	129	139	137	154	172	177	170
Median time open cases have spent in case examination (weeks)	2026-27	16	17	13									
	2025-26	7	7	7	8	9	10	11	13	12	14	14	16
Number of decisions made at case examination	2026-27	30	21	47									
	2025-26	32	18	31	32	23	23	20	19	15	13	14	20
% of cases closed at case examination	2026-27	60%	81%	70%									
	2025-26	47%	67%	61%	81%	74%	57%	65%	68%	73%	69%	57%	85%

Fitness to practise – case examiner

Performance data

Fitness to practise – case examiner		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
% of cases progressed to hearings	2026-27	40%	19%	30%									
	2025-26	53%	33%	39%	19%	26%	43%	35%	32%	27%	31%	43%	15%
Median time from receipt of concern to final FtP outcome at case examination (weeks)	2026-27	96	76	148									
	2025-26	122	144	84	111	104	136	85	120	116	141	131	160
Number of cases closed with 'No Impairment'	2026-27	9	8	19									
	2025-26	6	7	9	15	9	4	9	9	3	2	2	15
Number of cases closed with 'Impairment'	2026-27	9	9	14									
	2025-26	9	5	10	11	8	9	4	4	8	7	6	1
Number of Accepted Disposals offered	2026-27	16	10	17									
	2025-26	4	11	10	17	11	8	9	10	8	4	3	5

Fitness to practise – hearing

Performance data

Fitness to practise – hearing		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Median time from receipt of concern to final FtP outcome at Hearing (weeks)	2026-27	225	275	218									
	2025-26	231	217	260	337	204	214	230	229	226	232	255	251
Number of cases into hearings	2026-27	18	7	16									
	2025-26	27	7	13	8	6	14	7	8	7	6	7	6
Number of open cases in hearings	2026-27	403	404	404									
	2025-26	428	431	440	442	446	449	447	444	441	435	425	403
Median time open cases awaiting a hearing (weeks)	2026-27	116	121	119									
	2025-26	140	103	106	106	109	112	115	113	115	119	117	118
Number of decisions made at a hearing	2026-27	6	5	10									
	2025-26	1	3	2	4	2	7	8	9	7	7	16	24
Median time concluded cases spent in pre-hearing (weeks)	2026-27	144	244	128									
	2025-26	162	132	140	160	114	165	155	167	131	174	186	179

Fitness to practise – interim order and quality

Performance data

Fitness to practise – hearing		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Median time take to approve interim orders (working days)	2026-27	18	18	19									
	2025-26	14	18	18	N/A	18	19	19	19	17	17	20	19
Number of interim order application hearings	2026-27	4	1	9									
	2025-26	2	6	4	0	2	8	2	4	2	1	1	5
Number of interim orders imposed	2026-27	4	1	9									
	2025-26	2	6	4	0	2	8	2	4	2	1	1	4

Fitness to practise – internal quality		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
FtP internal quality score	2026-27	100%	89%	90%									
	2025-26	100%	89%	100%	91%	N/A	94%	84%	89%	N/A	86%	96%	88%

People

Performance data

People		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Retention rate	2026-27	88%	89%	90%									
	2025-26	89%	89%	89%	88%	88%	87%	88%	88%	89%	88%	89%	89%
Headcount of staff	2026-27	323	322	329									
	2025-26	276	271	276	279	288	285	300	309	308	314	316	325
Days lost to sickness per employee over previous 12 months	2026-27	7	7.1	7.2									
	2025-26	8.2	8.2	8.1	8	7.8	7.6	8	7.9	7.9	7.8	7.4	7

Corporate complaints

Performance data

Corporate complaints		Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Corporate complaints responded to within timescales	2026-27	100%	100%	100%									
	2025-26	91%	90%	100%	93%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	87%	100%
Number of corporate complaints received (stage 1 only)	2026-27	8	6	4									
	2025-26	5	9	10	17	6	10	16	14	18	16	7	11
Number of corporate complaints that missed 20-day timescale	2026-27	0	0	0									
	2025-26	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Median response time over previous 12 months (working days)	2026-27	14	14	15									
	2025-26	16	16	15	16	16	16	16	15	15	15	15	15

Annex B

Q1 2026-27 course reapproval and approval decisions



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Course approval decisions

Provider	Course	Region	Inspection dates		Link to inspection report	Decision
			From	to		
University of Kent	Social Work Degree Apprenticeship	South East	06 January 2026	08 January 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/smjmbisd/20260215_ukcpp517_ba_final.pdf	Approved
Anglia Ruskin University	Post Graduate Diploma in Social Work	Midlands	03 February 2026	05 February 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/35xa020o/03312026_arucpp150_approval_final_report.pdf	Approved
University of Birmingham	PG Cert Approved Mental Health Professional	Midlands	03 March 2026	04 March 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/et0b05jz/20260528_ubir1_a_amhp_final.pdf	Approved with conditions

Course reapproval decisions

Provider	Course	Region	Inspection dates		Link to inspection report	Decision
			From	to		
University of Hertfordshire	BIA	East	06 January 2026	07 January 2026	03032026_uhr1_bcp325_bia_report_final.pdf	Approved with conditions
University of Manchester	Best Interests Assessor	North West	20 January 2026	21 January 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/nx5bo2fp/20260407-umr1_b_final.pdf	Approved
University of the West of England, Bristol	Best Interests Assessment module	South West	27 January 2026	28 January 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/icol0vmy/20042026-uwebr1_bcp338-bia-report-final-1.pdf	Approved
University of Huddersfield	Best Interests Assessor	Yorkshire and the Humber	13 January 2026	14 January 2026	Microsoft Word - BIA report 29042026	Approved with conditions
University of Lincoln	Best Interests Assessor	East	19 January 2026	20 January 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/etglrf1i/190526_bia-report_ulir1_b_rd.pdf	Approved with conditions
University of Wolverhampton	Developing Capability as a Best Interests Assessor	Midlands	03 February 2026	04 February 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/kyomieui/20260330_uwor1_b_cp339_bia_final.pdf	Approved with conditions

Course reapproval decisions

Provider	Course	Region	Inspection dates		Link to inspection report	Decision
			From	to		
University of Birmingham	PG Cert Higher Specialist Work in Mental Health Services	Midlands	03 March 2026	04 March 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/et0b05jz/20260528_ubir1_a_amhp_final.pdf	Approved with conditions
University of Birmingham	PG Dip Higher Specialist Work in Mental Health Services	Midlands	03 March 2026	04 March 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/et0b05jz/20260528_ubir1_a_amhp_final.pdf	Approved with conditions
Bournemouth University	MA Advanced Mental Health Practice	South West	17 March 2026	18 March 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/v3zai44w/20260319_bur1a_amhp_final.pdf	Approved with conditions
Bournemouth University	PG Dip Advanced Mental Health Practice	South West	17 March 2026	18 March 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/v3zai44w/20260319_bur1a_amhp_final.pdf	Approved with conditions
Northumbria University at Newcastle	PGCert Approved Mental Health Professional	North East	05 May 2026	06 May 2026	https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/pkud053n/20260511_northumbria-university-amhp-report-final.pdf	Approved with conditions



Fitness to practise – performance Q1 2026/27

Agenda Item 11 Paper Ref 13

Paper for the
Social Work England Board

Sponsor
Philip Hallam, Executive Director, Regulation

Author
Philip Hallam, Stephen Barnett, Rachel Lloyd, Alexandra Hayward

Date
17 July 2026

Reviewed by
Colum Conway, Chief Executive

This paper is for
Assurance and Noting

Associated Strategic Objective
SO6: Review our fitness to practise case resolution approach, to improve service quality and fairness, and ensure value for money.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)
N/A

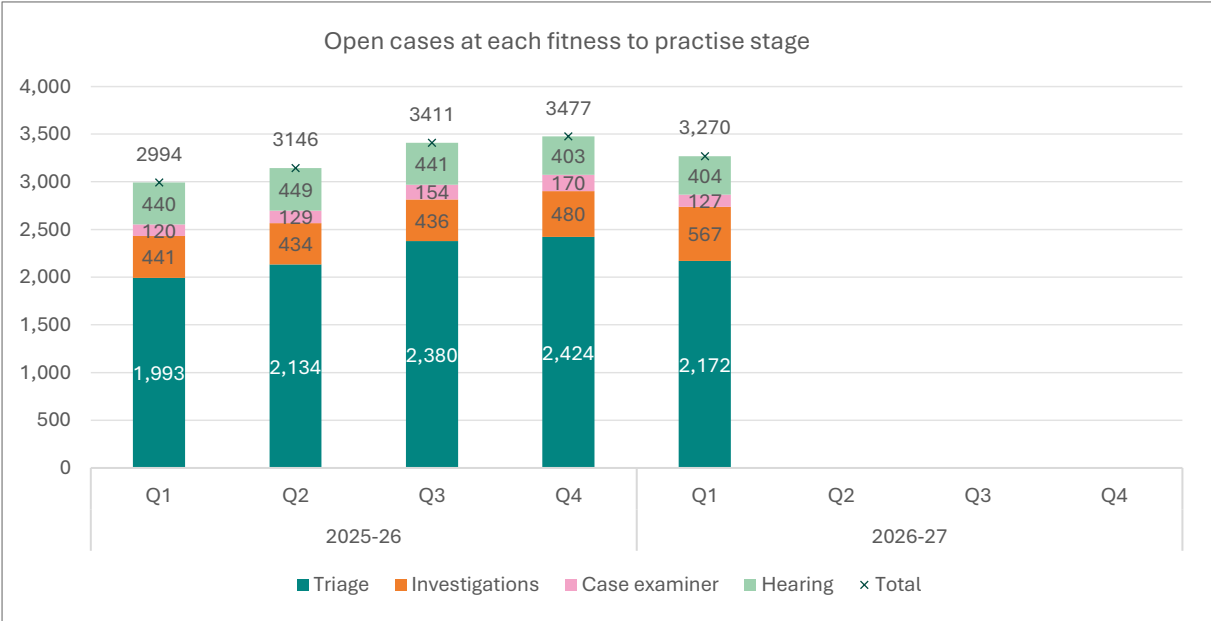
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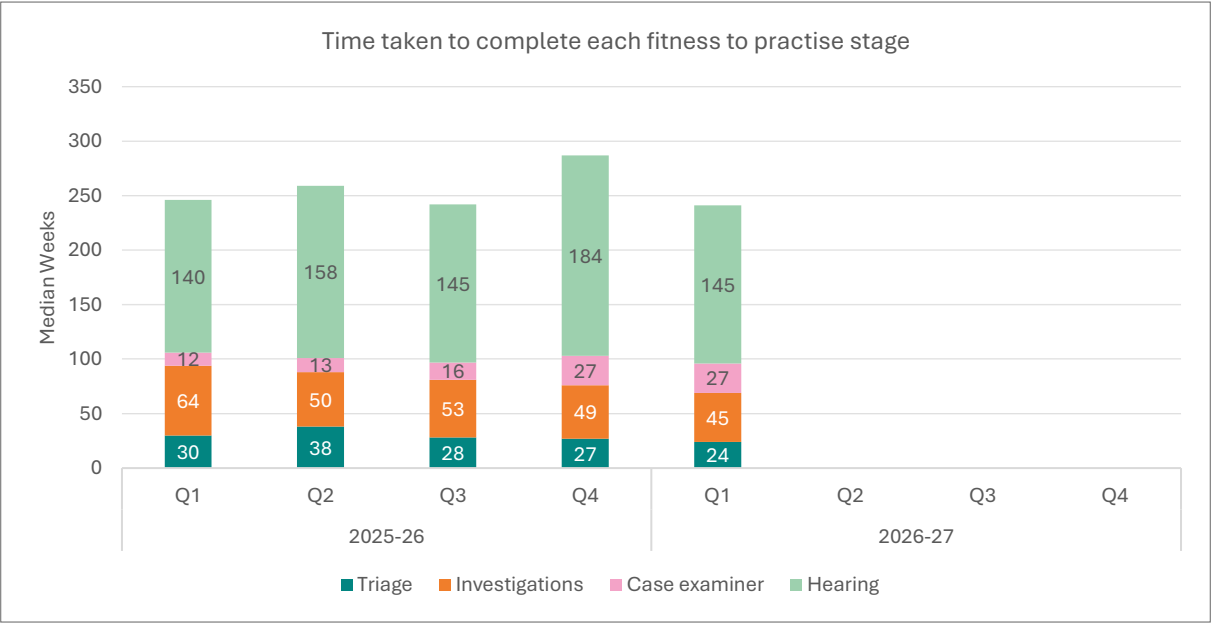
1. Summary

This report sets out performance for the first quarter of 2026-27. This paper focuses on the throughput of cases at each stage of fitness to practise and sets out our projections for caseloads at the end of the financial year. The paper also considers closure rates and decision-making outcomes, and references performance against timeliness indicators. It sets out activities that have taken place over the quarter and looks ahead to activities planned for the next quarter.

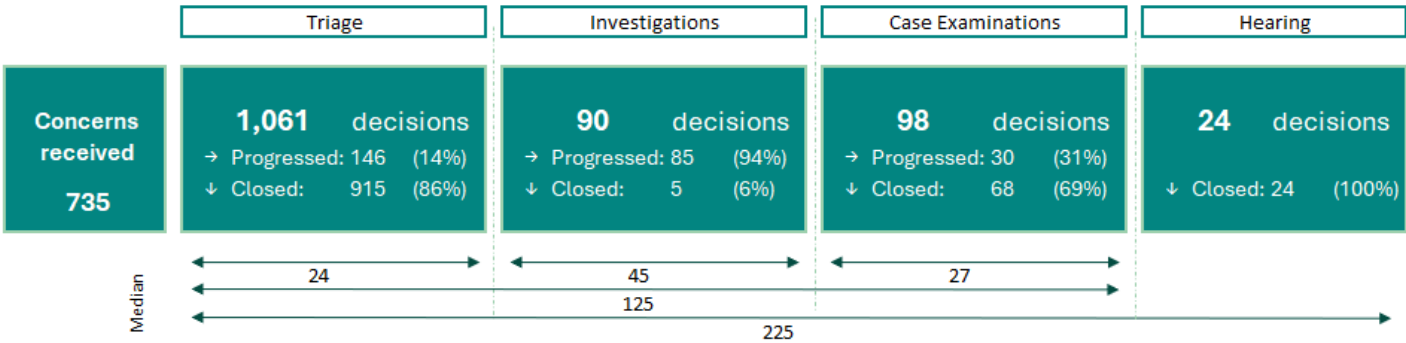
Headline performance for this quarter is as follows:

- We have closed more cases at triage than in any previous quarter and above our forecast. The overall caseload in triage, and the total number of open cases in fitness to practise, has reduced in Q1 because of this.
- The number of open triage cases remains high due to a 38% increase in referrals in 2025-26. However, the number of new referrals received this quarter has been stable at circa 250 per month.
- We have met the timeliness KPIs for both triage and investigations this quarter.
- New case examiners are fully trained and ready to take on a full caseload. In June 2026, the number of decisions made at the case examination (CE) stage exceeded our forecast and was the highest number of decisions made since Q4 2024-25. As the caseload at the CE stage continues to reduce, we expect that timeliness will begin to return to KPI.
- Hearings performance is in line with forecast and over 50% of the 168 cases being targeted for listing in 26-27 are either listed or concluded. The overall number of cases awaiting a hearing has remained stable at 404 cases.





Decision- making across the fitness to practise process in Q1 has been as below:



Note: Median timeliness is calculated separately for each team using only cases that progressed beyond that stage. As cases may close at different stages of the process, team medians are not cumulative.

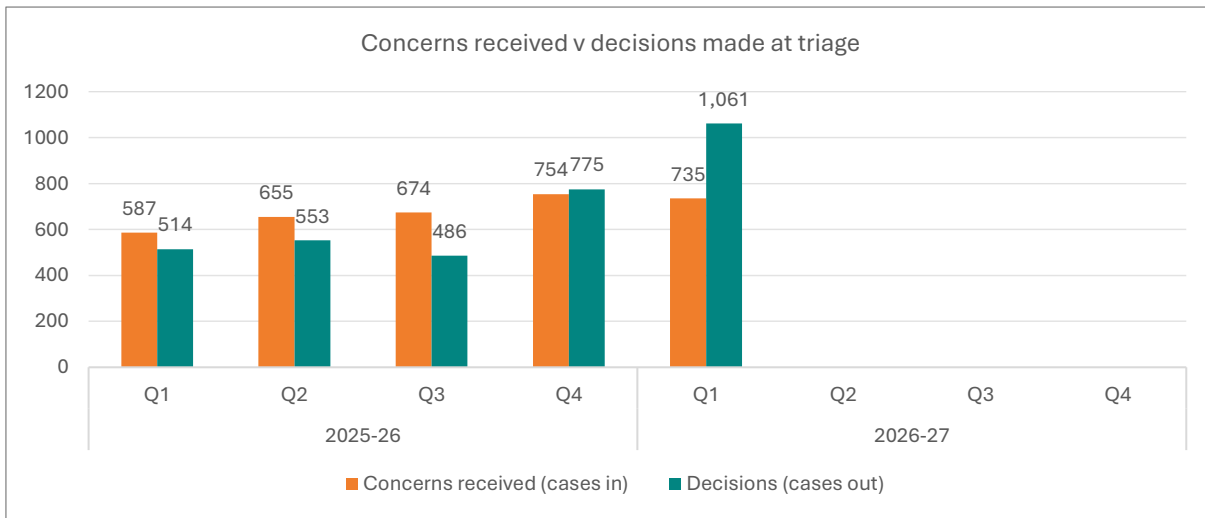
2. Triage

Triage continues to be affected by a backlog of cases, and the large and sustained increase in the number of referrals coming in. However, the triage service made more decisions in Q1 than in any previous quarter. In each month of Q1 the overall triage caseload fell as the number of decisions was higher than the number of new referrals.

The KPI at this stage of the fitness to practise process, time taken to complete triage, has improved in Q1 and is slightly better than target. However, as previously discussed with the Board, there will be continued volatility in this indicator throughout the financial year as older backlog cases are closed alongside newer ones.

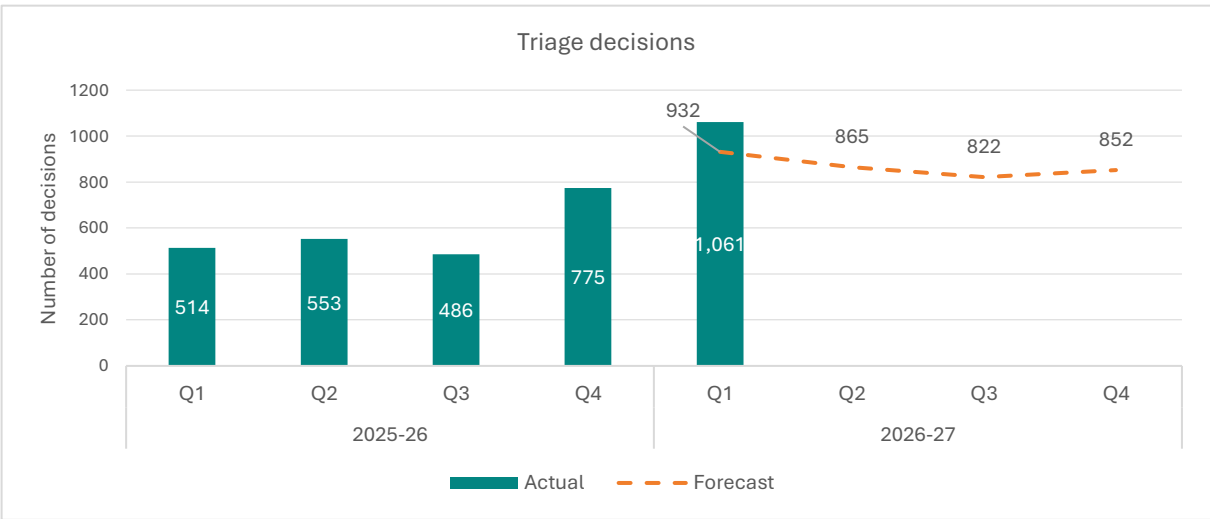
We received 38% more referrals in 2025-26 than in 2024/25. Q4 has also seen a higher number of new concerns received than in previous quarters in 2025/26. The average

number of referrals received has tracked broadly in line with our revised forecasts – we forecast 250 referrals per month and have received on average 245 in Q1. We continue to review referral rate changes and available resources on a regular basis.



Triage decision making in Q1 was above forecast - the total number of triage decisions made was 1,061 against a forecast of 932. This improvement continues to be led by the Head of Triage, and the testing of new ways of working related to the outcomes of the process review. The relatively high number of decisions in Q1 has also been supported by the recruitment of temporary part-time senior decision makers and some use of overtime.

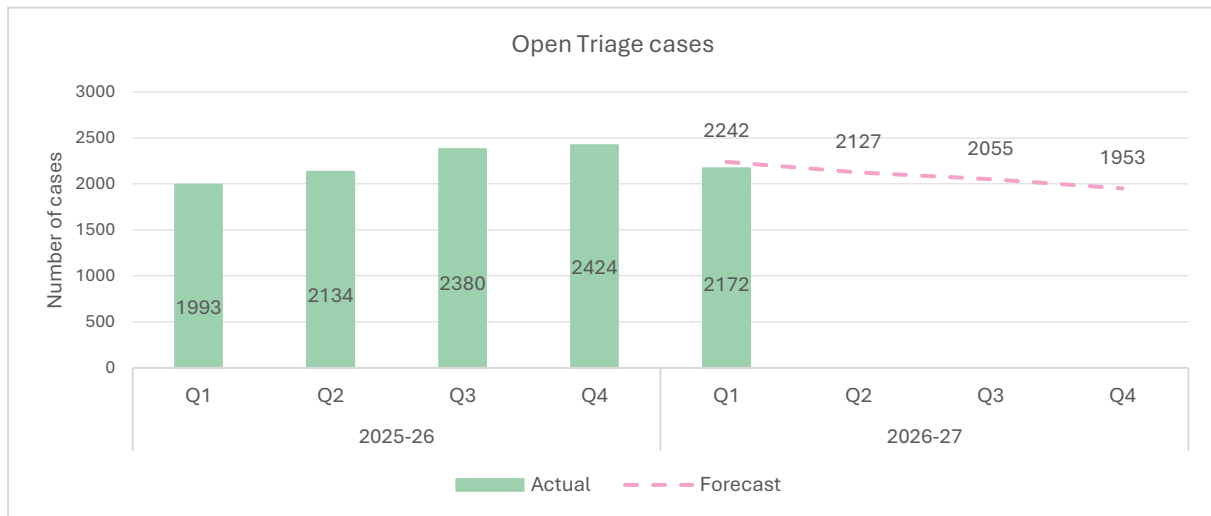
Performance to date, and our forecast for the remainder of the year, is as follows:



The forecast for decisions during the year takes into account the effect of recruitment and training of new staff.

The open caseload at the end of Q1 was 2,172, slightly better than our forecast of 2,242.

The forecast triage caseload for the remainder of the year is set out below.



The table below highlights the higher number of triage decisions made in Q1 of 2026/27 when compared to 2025/26. Closure rates in 2026/27 continue to be higher than our assumption of 80% of cases closing once the triage test is applied. In Q1, closure rates at the triage stage were at 86% (see below).

Triage decisions						Total decisions made
FY	Q	Closed		Progressed		
2026-27	Q1	915	86%	146	14%	1,061
2025-26	Q4	666	86%	109	14%	775
	Q3	401	83%	85	17%	486
	Q2	471	85%	82	15%	553
	Q1	422	82%	92	18%	514

The KPI for time taken to complete the triage stage of the fitness to practise process will fluctuate over the course of the financial year as older cases are concluded or progressed. For Q1 the time taken was 24 weeks against the quarterly target of 26 weeks.

Actions we have taken this quarter to address the high volume of cases in triage, and improve our approach, have included:

- Continued focus on performance by the Head of Triage. A renewed focus on performance across teams alongside the use of temporary additional resources has helped sustain high levels of decision making throughout the quarter, despite high referral volumes.
- The process review project to streamline processes across triage and investigations has concluded with all recommendations being approved by the

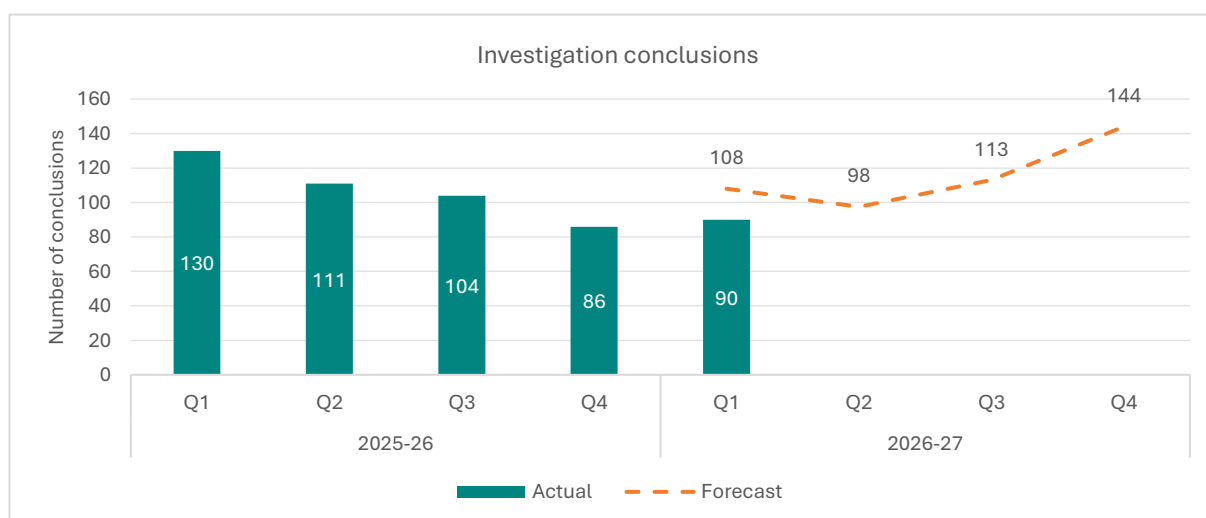
Executive Leadership Team. Implementation of recommendations has started – with additional recruitment into the triage team being a priority.

- Recruitment and retention remain a challenge within the service, with a number of staff moving to other roles in the organisation during this period. The process review has proposed recommendations to introduce more decision makers including reviewing the appropriate level of seniority needed to create more resilience and stability within a revised structure.

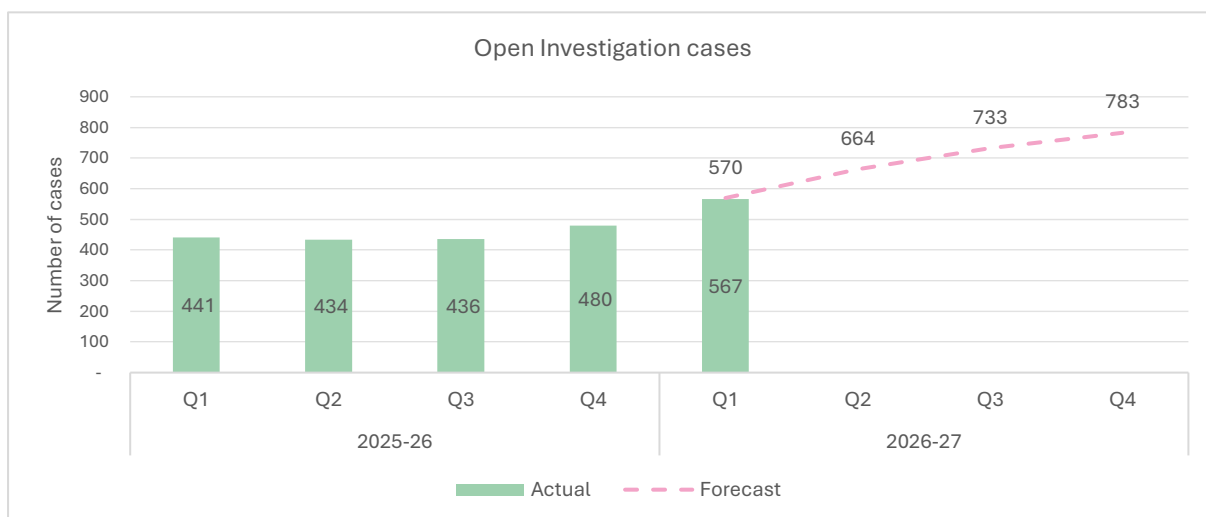
3. Investigations

- Time taken to conclude investigations is better than the Q1 target at 45 weeks.
- The overall caseload has risen during Q1 as more cases flow through from triage. The investigations service has also been recruiting new Investigators during this period to replace staff who have left.
- The open caseload is forecast to significantly increase through the course of 26/27.

The number of conclusions at the investigation stage was below our forecast for the quarter. This was caused by capacity within the team as new staff start and are inducted into their roles.



We forecast that the caseload at the investigation stage will continue to increase as more cases move from the triage stage in line with our forecast.



For Q1 the time taken was 45 weeks against the KPI target of 54 weeks.

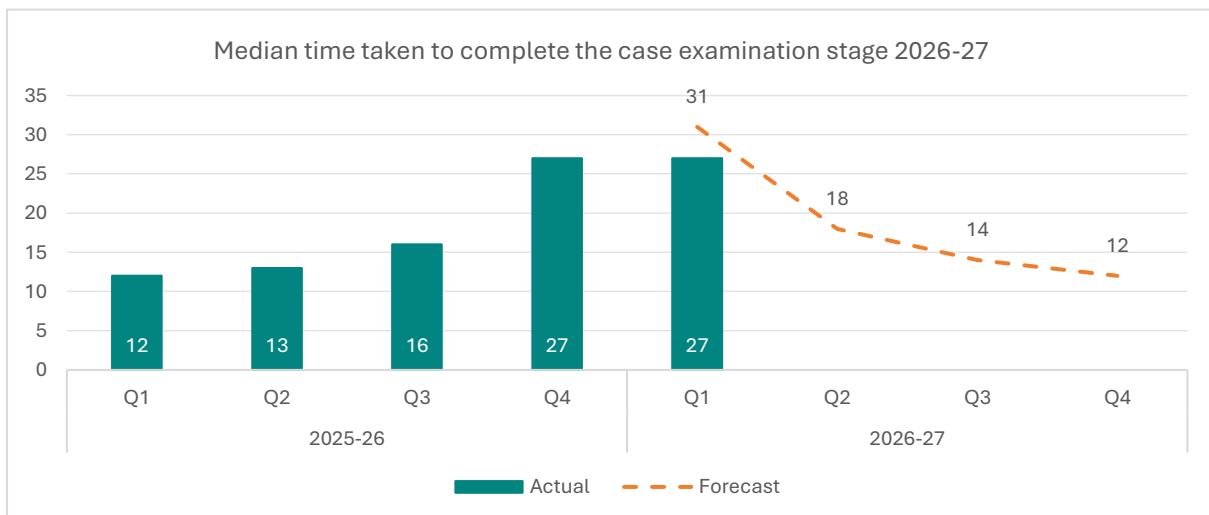
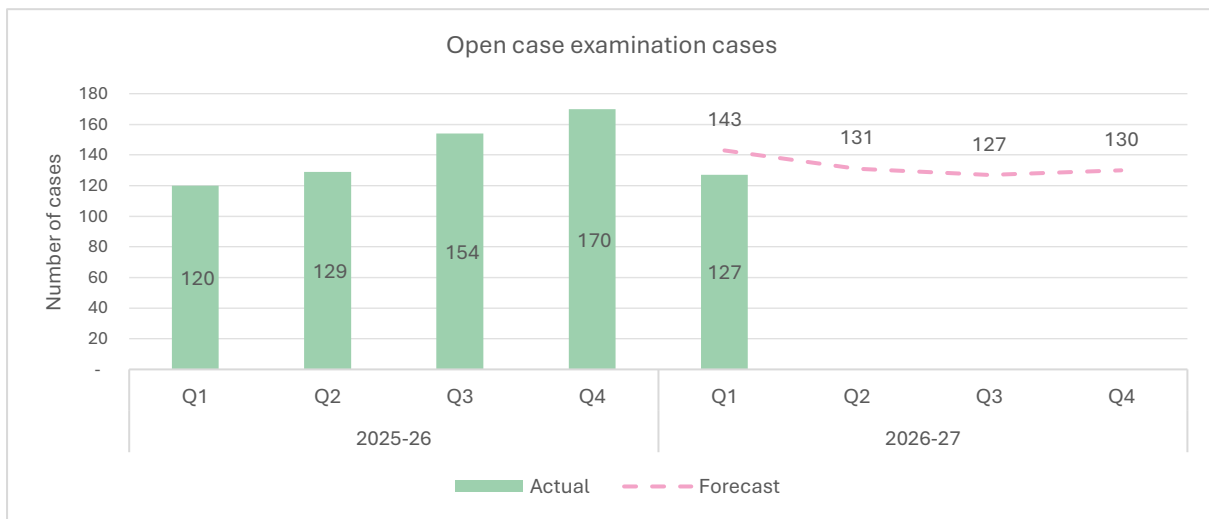
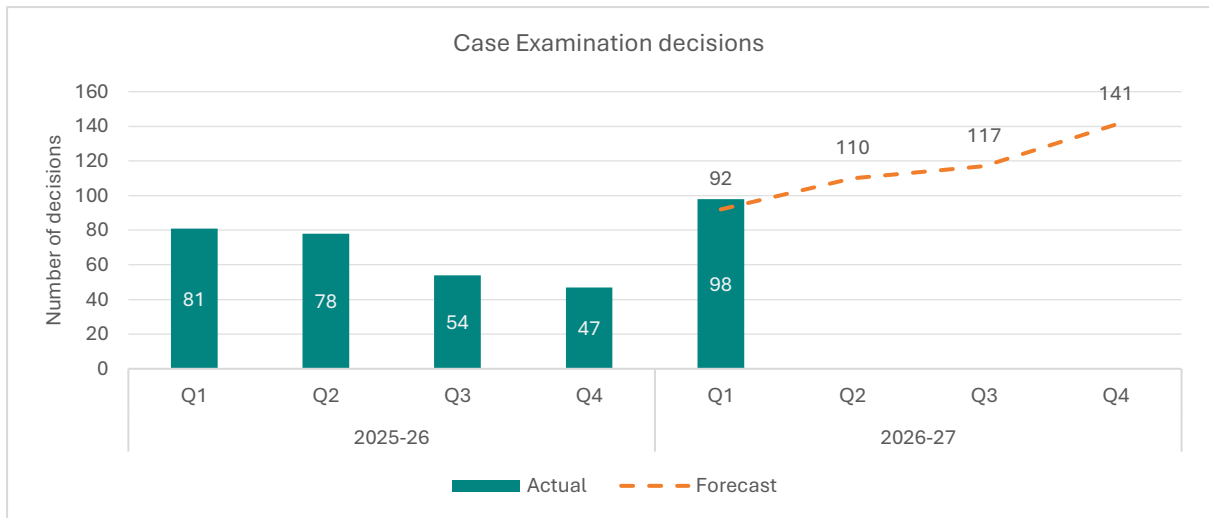
We continue to improve our approach to the investigation of cases, and activities taken in the investigations service this quarter have included:

- Concluding the process review and re-engineering project (alongside the triage process review). Recommendations for Investigations were approved by the Executive Leadership Team in May 2026. An implementation project has now been established to make changes resulting from the review throughout 2026/27.
- Further work on establishing improved management and monitoring of cases that are currently awaiting a hearing.

4. Case examination

The number of decisions at the case examination stage has increased by 109% in Q1 from the previous quarter. Both cohorts of new case examiners are now taking on full caseloads, and we anticipate 77% more decisions to be made over the financial year than in 2025-26.

The KPI for the quarter is 27 weeks. We anticipate that the KPI will reduce from Q2, as the number of cases awaiting a decision at this stage further reduces. We continue to review adjournments by case examiners to identify further opportunities for improvement.



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Of those cases concluded at the case examination stage, outcomes have been as follows:

Case examination decisions								Total decisions made
FY	Q	Closed no further action		Accepted disposal		Referred to hearing		
2026-27	Q1	36	37%	32	33%	30	31%	98
2025-26	Q4	19	41%	14	30%	13	28%	46
	Q3	21	39%	16	30%	17	31%	54
	Q2	28	36%	28	36%	22	28%	78
	Q1	22	27%	24	30%	35	43%	81

The referral rate to hearing was within the forecast range, with 31% of cases referred this quarter.

For 2026-27, we have also set out a target for the median time taken from receipt of a concern to the closure at the case examination stage. By the end of the year, we have set out that this time taken should be 92 weeks. For this quarter, the time taken is 125 weeks. As with KPIs above, this KPI will be subject to volatility until the volume and age of cases reduces.

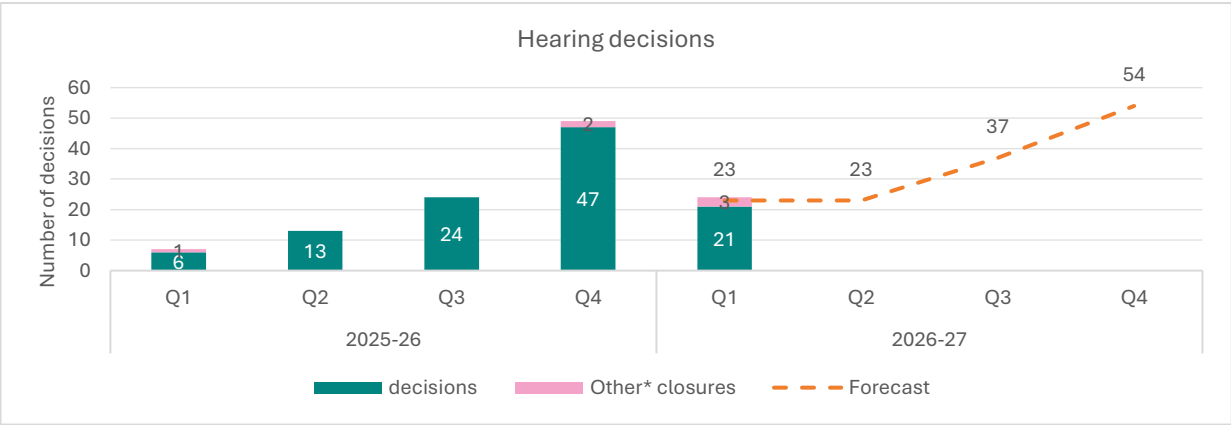
5. Hearings

There are currently 404 cases at the hearings stage of the fitness to practise process. Over the course of the quarter, 30 cases have been referred by case examiners. This is in line with our forecast.

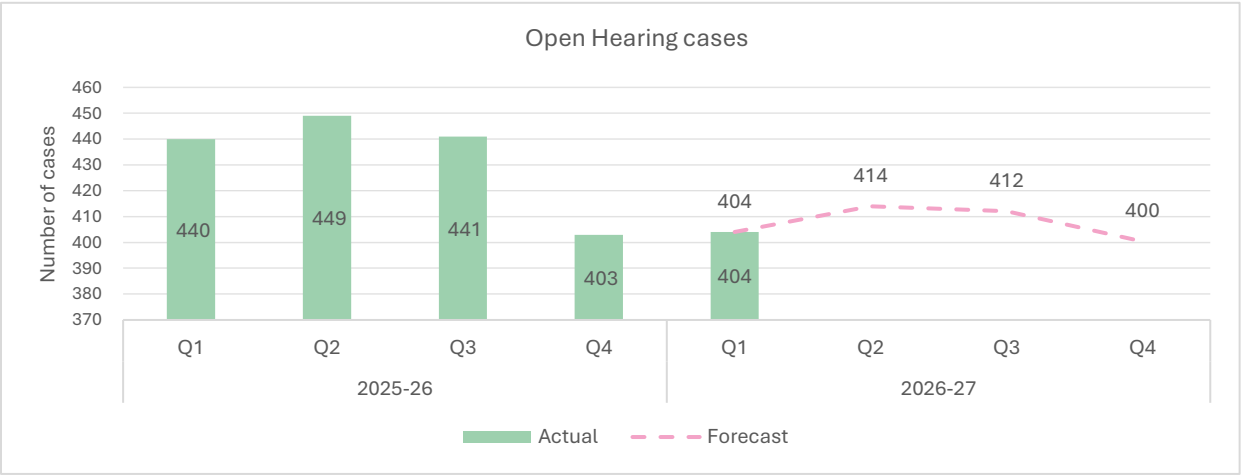
We forecast that 168 cases will be listed this year, and 137 concluded at the hearings stage by the end of the financial year. This takes into account an 18% adjournment rate.

We continue to work with our external legal provider to progress as many cases for a hearing as possible. We have now concluded our re-procurement of legal services and are in the process of onboarding an additional external legal provider which will give us greater capacity for listing hearings in future years.

We continue to monitor the time taken from receipt of concern to the final outcome at hearing stage. Timeliness will continue to be affected by the backlog of cases awaiting conclusion at this stage. For Q1 the time taken is 225 weeks.



*Other closures include voluntary removal from the register or removal from the register on another fitness to practise case.



This quarter, 21 cases were disposed of via a final hearing, with the following outcomes:

Hearing outcomes	2026-27	2025-26			
	Q1	Q4	Q3	Q2	Q1
No impairment, no further action	7	16	3	5	2
No impairment, advice	1	1	0	0	0
No impairment, warning	1	1	1	0	0
Impaired, advice	0	1	0	0	0
Impaired, warning order	1	3	1	0	0
Impaired, conditions of practice order	0	1	1	0	0
Impaired, suspension order	1	5	8	3	3
Impaired, removal order	10	19	10	5	1

In addition to the above outcomes, we have also concluded three additional cases by other means, taking the total number of concluded final hearings to 24 at the end of Q1.

6. Interim orders and case review

We continue to meet our KPI target for the time taken to approve interim orders.

In Q1, 14 interim order applications were considered by adjudicators, and 14 orders granted (12 suspension orders and 2 conditions of practice orders.)

Our case review team continue to support social workers subject to interim or final orders, and in Q1, 48 interim order review and 19 final order review hearing events were held.

7. Other fitness to practise activities

In Q1 there were four ongoing judicial review claims at permission stage (two in respect of cases closed at triage, one in respect of a referral where a triage decision has not yet been made and one brought by a former registrant).

Alongside this, we continue to receive learning points from the Professional Standards Authority relating to cases they have considered through their section 29 process. This process allows for the Professional Standards Authority to review final fitness to practise panel decisions and disseminate any learning identified. We review these learning points and share internally and with our partners.

Our Decision Review Group continues to review decisions from across the different stages of the fitness to practise process. Our internal quality score for Q1 is 92%

In Q1, our legal team received 3 new applications to review a case examiner decision, of these applications:

- 1 was considered at stage 1 of the process,
- 2 cases were determined ineligible and subsequently closed.

No cases were referred back to the case examiners for a fresh decision

In Q1 we have received 8 applications for voluntary removal from the register by registrants currently in the fitness to practise process. We made 7 decisions in the quarter, with 3 applications being granted, 2 being refused, 1 being withdrawn and the final one being closed for administrative reasons.

8. Looking ahead to Q2 2026/27

Following the publication of the independent review report, we will be taking forward the recommendation relating to an end-to-end fitness to practise strategy. This strategy will be shared with the Board in Q2 and will include information on the throughput and timeliness targets discussed in this report, and set out our future targets for this financial year and beyond.

In preparing that strategy, we will continue to proactively monitor and adjust our referral assumptions and our decision-making targets. On the assumption that referral rates do not reduce, our current modelling shows a reduction in the **triage** caseload throughout 2026/27 and into 2027/28. Recommendations stemming from our triage process review

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are now being introduced as part of an implementation project. This includes new ways of working alongside a restructured staffing establishment in triage, with temporary triage roles also recruited in 26/27 and 27/28. More information about the outcomes of the review, and the implementation work we are taking forward, are set out in the annex to this report.

In **investigations** we will continue to work closely with our external legal provider to ensure that a pipeline of ongoing work at all stages is maintained. The onboarding of a second external legal provider is due to take place in Q2 of 2026/27.

In **case examinations** the 2 new cohorts are being embedded in the team and supported to scale up their caseload, as they grow in experience. This will further reduce the caseload at this stage and improve timeliness. We will conclude our review of the case examiner establishment, to ensure that we build in further capacity to scale up at pace if we experience unexpected vacancies.

In **hearings and case review** we will continue to list cases for hearing as expeditiously as possible, using resources available to us and working closely with our external legal providers. Now that our process for adjudicator consensual disposal is available, we are considering any cases that might be suitable for conclusion using this process.

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Annexe – outcomes and implementation of the triage and investigations process review

Introduction

The process review of triage and investigations reported to the Executive Leadership Team on 19 May 2026. The report recommends new ways of working, with teams supported in a different way by legal and professional advice. Additional staffing in both services is also recommended to address increased caseloads caused by the 38% increase in referrals during 2025/26, with temporary staffing also needed to clear the backlog of triage cases.

New ways of working are designed to improve timeliness, and also to save costs in the long-term by more efficiently closing cases in triage and ‘upstreaming’ investigations – reducing aspects of our spend with external legal providers by doing more work in-house and increasing the number of cases closed by Case Examiners.

Approach to review

The review was undertaken during 2025/26 through:

- Process mapping
- Reviewing the approach of other regulators
- Gathering improvement suggestions from teams
- Input of an external consultancy firm and a separate FtP external consultant
- Developing process re-engineering proposals and recommendations

An extensive list of improvement suggestions has been collated in order to plan, prioritise and resource a longer-term change programme across both services.

Triage

The main causes of delays at triage are: increases in referrals being received (38% increase in 25/26 compared to 24/25); the high volume of referrals being processed that are not FtP issues (81-85% of referrals do not relate to FtP - note that this is comparable with other regulators); the high volume of referrals progressing to a full triage test decision (71%) - these are essentially worked on twice, at ‘pre-triage’ and at the ‘triage’ stage; significant delays associated with restricted information issues.

The mapping of current processes highlighted a range of overly complicated ways of working. The three-stage triage process involves multiple handovers between different officer roles and different managers. The sub-division of management roles creates additional bottlenecks.

We currently spend too much time working on cases that are likely going to be closed further down the line. Alongside resourcing constraints and increasing volumes of referrals, this has resulted in a large backlog of cases waiting to be further processed; cases awaiting information from different stakeholders; and cases where we are

waiting for family court or other restricted information – with the vast majority of these cases subsequently being closed at the triage test stage. Whilst this approach has helped to ensure robust decision making that assists the persons raising concerns to understand how we reached our decisions, it has meant that against a backdrop of significantly more concerns this approach is not sustainable for the future. The review has therefore identified a number of recommendations for change.

Our main recommendations for triage are: to ensure the staffing establishment reflects the number of referrals we now receive; increase staffing levels for a period of 18-24 months to address the backlog; streamline processes so that a single case holder deals with all three different stages of triage; re-engineer the pre-triage stage so that we give better direction to (and close many more) cases at the earliest stage of the process – supported by more legal input and professional advice.

Investigations

The review has highlighted a number of key themes and associated recommendations:

- The benefits, cost savings and timeliness, of providing investigations with more initial legal input where appropriate to give direction, narrow scope and reduce unnecessary lines of enquiry.
- The advantages, both in cost savings and in terms of customer experience, in taking witness statements earlier, by training our own Investigators to do this work prior to consideration by case examiners, rather than the current approach of taking statements via our external legal provider once a case is referred for a hearing.
- The need for a senior investigator role to take on the more complex investigations we see; provide additional capacity across the team and support progression and retention of our most experienced staff.
- Improved mechanisms for evidence gathering.

Other recommendations

In addition to those highlighted above, other recommendations include:

- Implement a new throughput model – recognising the staffing levels needed to sustain throughput of cases in both services
- Introduce new staffing structures in 2026/27 and 2027/28
- Use data & insight to create clearer pathways for different types of triage cases
- Update guidance and templates to support decision making in both services
- Establish requirements for an improved case management system
- Develop new approaches to escalation & engaging with stakeholders
- Progress opportunities for automation, use of technology and AI

A project team is in place to manage the delivery of recommendations during 2026/27.

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Finance and Commercial Update

Agenda Item 12 Paper Ref 14

Paper for the
Social Work England Board

Sponsor
Linda Dale, Executive Director, People and Business Support

Author
Kaye Gilbert, Senior Finance Business Partner

Date
17 July 2026

Reviewed by
Linda Dale, Executive Director, People and Business Support

This paper is for
Assurance and noting

Associated Strategic Objective
SO10: Continually develop and improve how we work, ensuring we are a well-run organisation that delivers the right outcomes and provides value for money.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite
Financial governance – Cautious

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)
N/A

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1. Summary

This paper provides an update on the following:

- Management accounts for the month ending 30 June 2026
- Recent commercial activity

2. Action required

For discussion and noting.

3. Commentary

Management Accounts

A summary set of the management accounts for the month ended 30 June 2026 can be found in Annex A.

- Year-to-date actuals for June 2026 show net revenue expenditure of £4.029m against the DfE budget of £3.801m, representing an overspend of £228k / 6.0%.
- Year-to-date actuals for June 26 show net revenue expenditure of £4.029m against Board Budget of £4.349m representing an underspend of £320k / 7.36%.
- The overspend is based on Social Work England's total budget being higher than the DfE approved budget. Cost pressures include Regulation staffing, agency and contractor costs, recruitment fees, family court advice and Forge revenue expenditure.
- Fee income is £35k below budget YTD. This reflects higher than expected renewals and restorations income, offset by lower income from new registrants and scrutiny fees. Scrutiny applications have reduced significantly, by around 50%, following the fee increase introduced in December 2025, and the full-year forecast has been updated to reflect this revised income profile and now assumes a fee income shortfall of £267k against DfE budget.
- External legal costs are currently £42k below DfE budget YTD. Further reforecasting is underway to assess whether this reflects timing or a sustainable full-year underspend. At this stage, the full-year forecast remains aligned to budget.
- Capital expenditure is £747k, £90k above budget YTD, mainly due to the timing of Forge-related investment and IT additions. The phasing and classification of digital expenditure continue to be reviewed to ensure alignment with approved budgets.
- At this early stage of the financial year, the organisation is forecasting to deliver within the total budget approved by the board. Current forecasts indicate that expenditure pressures, including those within Regulation staffing and digital delivery, can be managed within the available funding envelope through a combination of budget management and utilisation of approved at-risk funding. While fee income is forecast to be below budget, this is currently expected to be offset by expenditure management across the organisation.

- Work is ongoing with budget holders and directorates to refine expenditure and income profiles. Forecast accuracy is expected to improve from July onwards as more in-year trends emerge, and performance will continue to be monitored through the monthly management accounts process.
- The balance sheet remains stable at 30 June 2026, reflecting continued investment in strategic digital assets, with non-current assets of £10.3m, including the internally generated system and Forge assets under construction. Working capital is negative £8.5m, primarily due to deferred income and accrued liabilities, which is consistent with the organisation's funding model and does not present any liquidity concerns. Non-current liabilities remain stable at £0.8m, and overall net assets are £1.0m. There are no indicators of financial stress or material balance sheet risk.
- The bank balance as at 30 June 26 was £1.1m and remains within the DfE prescribed preferred limit of £3.5m.

4. Commercial Update

- Procurement of External Legal Providers (SWE10547) is at the contracting stage, two suppliers (Capsticks and Kingsley Napley) have been awarded. The Legal team is in contract discussions with both suppliers with the expectation of signing in July and are estimating a start date such that spend aligns to budget.
- The expected award date for Translation and Transcription (SWE10564) is August 2026. There has been significant interest in both lots, and a good return is expected.
- The Emotional Support Line (SWE10617) service contract was awarded to Wellbeing Solutions and the support line went live on 8 July 2026.
- The board is due to discuss the business case for provision of Legal Advice (SWE10625) at the meeting on 17 July 2026. Subject to board approval, early market research is due to commence in July 2026.
- Our contract for redaction and document bundling services is due to be re-procured before the current contract ends in September 2026. The business case is below the threshold for ARAC/board approval.

5. Conclusions and/or Recommendations

N/A

6. Annexes

Annexe A – management accounts

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Annexe A – Management accounts to 30 June 2026 and full year forecast

Directorates	Year to date amount	Year to date budget	Year to date £ variance	Year to date % variance	Current expected full year spend	Current DfE Grant in Aid (GIA)	At risk budget Total budget - GIA	Full year total budget	£ Variance forecast to budget	% Variance forecast to budget
					Full year forecast	Full year budget	At risk	Full year total budget	Full year £ variance	Full year % variance
Fee Income	(3,337,572)	(3,372,159)	(34,587)	(1.0%)	(13,546,827)	(13,813,875)	0	(13,813,875)	(267,048)	(1.9%)
Executive Leadership Team										
Wages & Salaries	154,415	137,459	(16,956)	(12.3%)	559,459	559,459	0	559,459	0	0.0%
Support	25,016	10,605	(14,411)	(135.9%)	27,270	27,270	0	27,270	0	0.0%
Total	179,431	148,064	(31,367)	(21.2%)	586,729	586,729	0	586,729	0	0.0%
People & Business Support										
Wages & Salaries	882,433	962,929	80,496	8.4%	3,914,765	3,914,765	0	3,914,765	0	0.0%
Support	1,462,273	1,288,509	(173,765)	(13.5%)	3,527,667	3,515,667	585	3,515,082	(12,585)	(0.4%)
Total	2,344,706	2,251,438	(93,268)	(4.1%)	7,442,432	7,430,432	(585)	7,429,847	(12,585)	(0.2%)
Regulation										
Wages & Salaries	2,620,270	2,453,848	(166,422)	(6.8%)	12,435,579	9,987,162	(2,399,328)	12,386,490	(49,089)	(0.4%)
Support	1,414,706	1,482,367	67,660	4.6%	8,852,317	8,329,522	(851,516)	9,181,039	328,722	3.6%
Total	4,034,976	3,936,215	(98,761)	(2.5%)	21,287,896	18,316,685	3,250,844	21,567,529	279,633	1.3%
Professional practice and external engagement										
Wages & Salaries	745,274	769,289	24,015	3.1%	3,131,007	3,131,007	0	3,131,007	0	0.0%
Support	61,800	68,153	6,353	9.3%	618,209	548,658	(69,551)	618,209	0	0.0%
Total	807,073	837,442	30,369	3.6%	3,749,216	3,679,665	69,551	3,749,216	0	0.0%
Total Expenditure	7,366,187	7,173,159	(193,028)	(2.7%)	33,066,273	30,013,510	3,319,810	33,333,321	267,048	0.8%
Net Expenditure	4,028,615	3,801,000	(227,615)	(6.0%)	19,519,446	16,199,635	3,319,810	19,519,446	(0)	(0.0%)
Depreciation/Amortisation	602,785	608,962	6,177	1.0%	2,435,848	2,435,848	0	2,435,848	0	0.0%
Net Expenditure inc Depreciation	4,631,400	4,409,962	(221,438)	(5.0%)	21,955,294	18,635,483	3,319,810	21,955,294	(0)	(0.0%)
Capital Expenditure	747,216	657,000	(90,216)	(13.7%)	2,838,000	2,838,000	0	2,838,000	0	0.0%
Total	5,378,616	5,066,962	(311,654)	(6.2%)	24,793,294	21,473,483	3,319,810	24,793,294	(0)	(0.0%)

Balance Sheet as at 30th June 2026

	Cost £	Depreciation £	N.B.V £
Fixed Assets			
Buildings	1,264,299	(1,082,717)	181,582
Right of Use Asset	1,129,345	(721,472)	407,874
IT Equipment	1,407,303	(1,039,428)	367,875
Fixtures & Fittings	346,497	(322,830)	23,667
Internally generated system	11,495,766	(6,065,839)	5,429,927
Forge System (WIP)	3,893,043	0	3,893,043
	19,536,252	(9,232,285)	10,303,968
Current Assets			
Prepayments			567,757
Bank			1,190,499
Debtors			(1,184)
			1,757,073
Current Liabilities			
Accruals			(3,743,008)
Deferred Income			(5,309,023)
Payables			(1,233,089)
			(10,285,120)
Working Capital (Current Assets less Current Liabilities)			(8,528,047)
Non-Current Liabilities			
Short Term - PFI Finance Lease Liability Additions			(1,152,302)
Lease liability payments			669,623
Lease interest			(99,335)
Provisions			(175,074)
			(757,088)
Total Assets & Liabilities			1,018,832
Taxpayers' equity			1,018,832

Fitness to Practise concerns and referrals research outcomes

Agenda Item 13 Paper Ref 15

Paper for the

Social Work England Board

Sponsor

Sarah Blackmore, Executive Director, Professional Practice and External Engagement

Author

Rebecca Mulvaney, Senior Policy Manager

Date

17 July 2026

Reviewed by

Natalie Day, Assistant Director, Policy and Strategy

This paper is for

Assurance and Noting

Associated Strategic Objective

SO6: Review our fitness to practise case resolution approach, to improve service quality and fairness, and ensure value for money.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite

Regulatory functions - Cautious

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

N/A

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1. Summary

Social Work England, and other professional regulators across the UK, are currently experiencing increased referral rates. We have endeavoured, through desk-based research and an analysis of a sample of pre-triage cases, to explore potential drivers for why referrals to us are increasing. We have focused at this stage of the work on furthering our understanding of who is raising concerns with us and what their expectations might be. This paper shares an overview of the initial findings from our research.

2. Action required

For assurance and noting.

3. Commentary

Background

Since December 2024 we have experienced a persistent increase in the number of referrals we are receiving. We received 38% more concerns in 2025/26 than in 2024/25. Quarter 4 of 2025/26 saw a higher number of new concerns received than in previous quarters in 2025/26. The average number of concerns received during 2023/24 and 2024/25 was 158 and 161 per month respectively, and the average for 2025/26 was 223.

Despite the increase in referrals, closure rates at the triage stage have reached 85%, higher than our assumption of 80% in previous years. Closure rates relating to referrals from members of the public are consistently over 96%. This suggests that the increase in referrals is not being driven by an increase in concerns that require further regulatory action.

This paper outlines the insight we have gained through research to explore 3 questions:

1. Why are referrals increasing?
2. Who is raising concerns with us?
3. What do referrers want/expect from us?

To answer these questions, we have carried out an in-depth qualitative analysis of 500 pre-triage cases from quarter 1 2024/25 to quarter 1 2025/26. We have also carried out desk-based research and have engaged with other regulators to consider their experiences of seeing and analysing similar trends.

Limitations in our data

It should be noted that there are some limitations in our data. Cases that progress from the concern stage to pre-triage are updated with case information, however, given the current backlog at the triage stage, a significant number of cases are awaiting case information. This has led to an increasing number of ‘unknown’ sources of referral over the past 12 months, leading to gaps in our understanding linked to concern types.

We are also exploring how we could collect data in the future and whether this could/should be more specific, for example, breaking down ‘member of the public’ into further categories, or collecting additional demographic information.

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This has meant we have been limited in some of the conclusions we can draw or how confident we can be in the trends we identify. We are engaging with regulators through the Alliance Network and the Cross-Regulatory Research Network to understand the data they collect from referrers and about registrants, and how this is then collated and analysed to produce insight.

In addition, we had to rely on an interpretation of the information provided by complainants, meaning that elements of our analysis were subjective, rather than objective. However, we wanted to capture aspects of nuance such as this to further understand the perspectives and expectations of members of the public who raise concerns with us. We have taken a thematic and qualitative approach to analysis by identifying key words or phrases, which could then be categorised into overarching themes. This again relies on a substantive degree of interpretation, which should be considered when digesting the research findings.

Analysis of pre-triage cases

Complainant type

There was a large proportion of pre-triage cases without data on complainant type, which has been the driver of increasing ‘unknown’ sources of referral. However, we found that it was mostly possible to identify complainant type using the case summary. This suggests that ‘unknown’ sources of referral do not appear to be caused by challenges in accurately determining the complainant type and can be resolved in the future by prioritising data capture within our triage process.

Chart 1: Most common complainant type across quarters (coded by research colleagues)

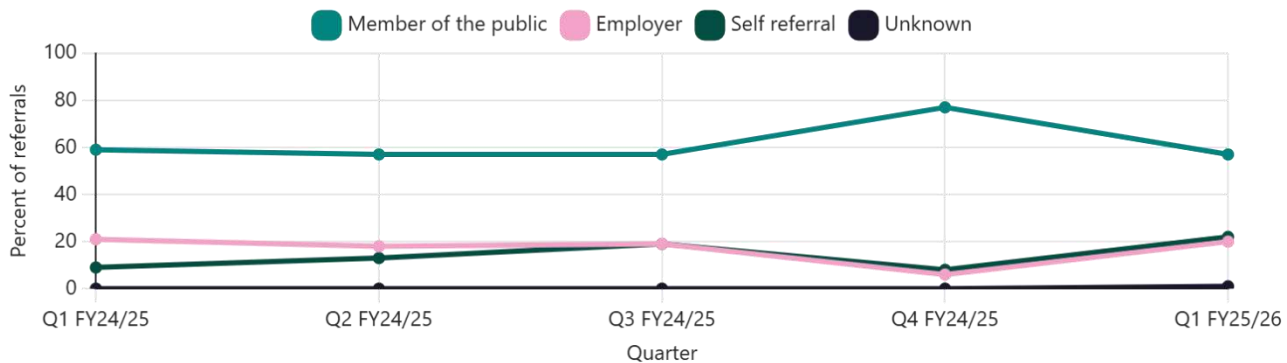
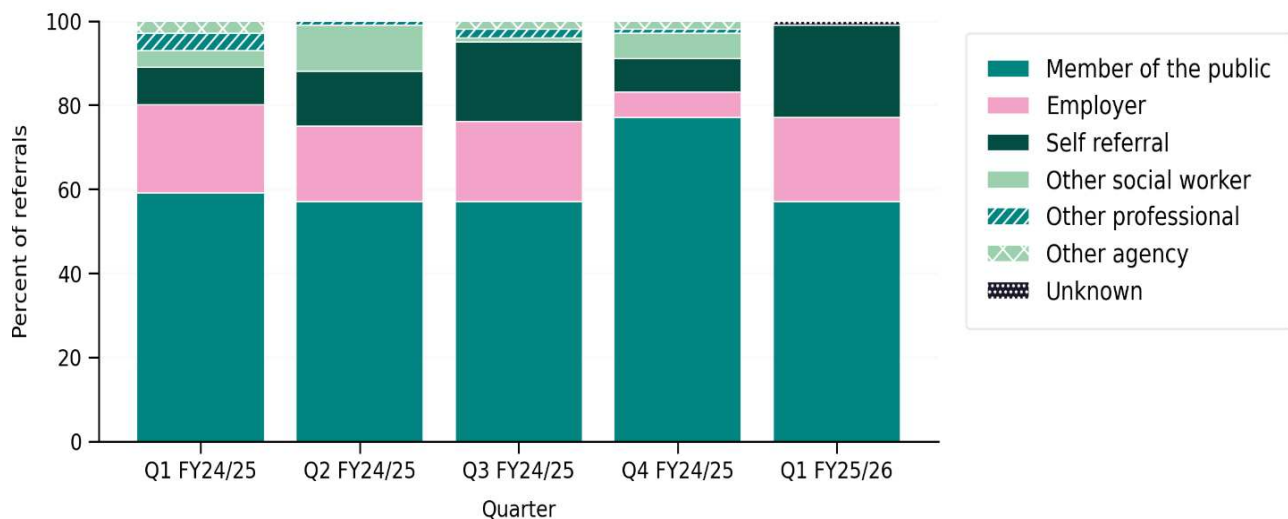


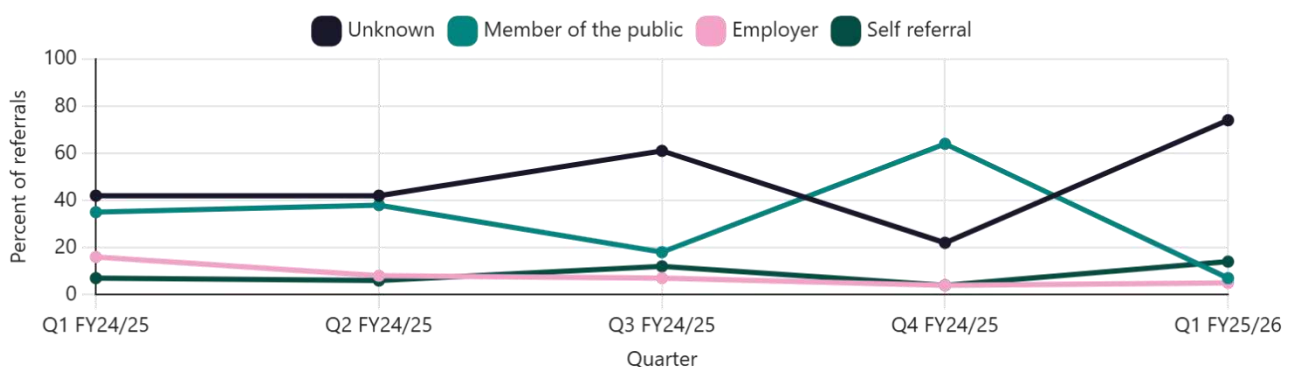
Chart 2: Full complainant type trends across quarters (coded by the research team)



Key observations on trends within complainant type:

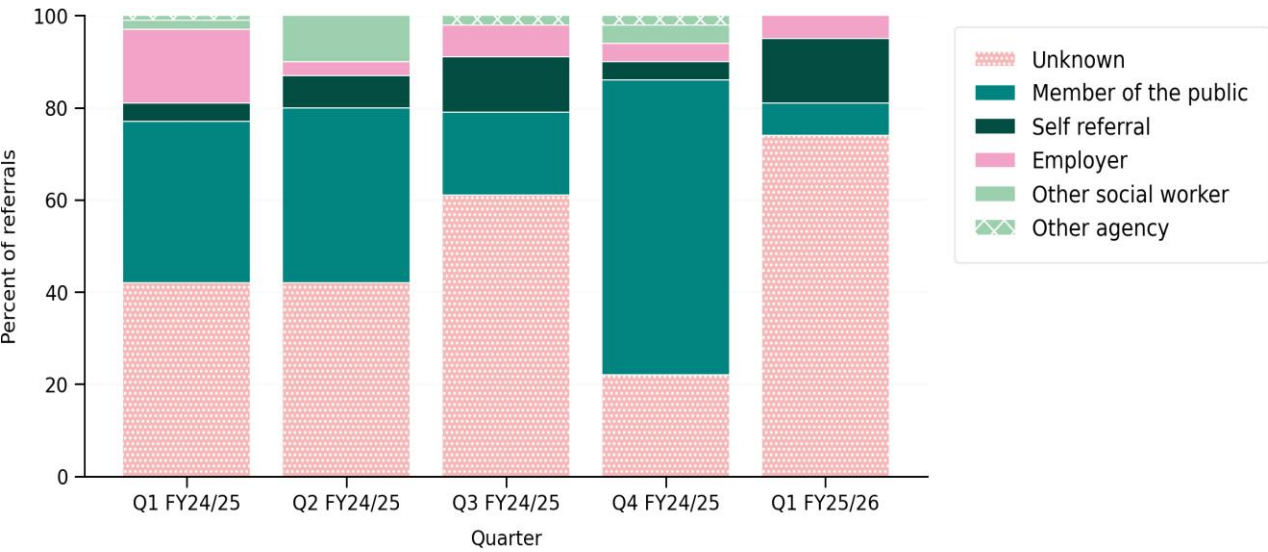
- **Members of the public (61%) comprised the most common source of referrals**, followed by employer (16.8%), self-referral (14.2%), other social worker (4.4%), other professional (1.6%), other agency (1.4%) and unknown (0.2%).
- Referral rates from members of the public have remained relatively stable across all quarters (57% - 59%) apart from a spike to 77% in Q4 24/25.
- **Referral rates from self-referrals appear to be trending upwards** from 9% in Q1 24/25, 19% in Q3 25/26, to a high of 22% in Q1 25/26.
- Referral rates from employers have remained largely consistent (19% - 21%) apart from a drop to 6% in Q1 24/25, which has brought down the overall average.

Chart 3: Most common complainant type across quarters (entered by triage colleagues)



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Chart 4: Full complainant type trends across quarters (entered by triage colleagues)



Key reflections on differences between complainant type coded by the research team compared to information available in the Data tab within our case management system, :

- ‘Unknown’ sources of referral may be obscuring spikes in referrals from members of the public, which would be beneficial for us to track over time to understand whether external events influence referral rates.
- **‘Unknown’ sources of referral may be obscuring the number of referrals received by employers**, as this is notably lower (7% overall vs 16.8% overall) compared to coding by the research team.
- ‘Unknown’ sources of referral may be obscuring an increasing trend in self-referrals (8.2% overall vs 14.2% overall).
- **Current data capture may not be identifying referrals from ‘other professionals’** which may be useful to distinguish from members of the public. For example, if a professional raises a concern based on observations of a social worker’s practice through multi-agency working.

Currently, when we report on our [fitness to practise and referrals data](#) externally, we break it down into the following categories:

- Employer
- Member of the public
- Other
- Unknown

We are considering reporting on self-referrals as a distinct category so that this can be better monitored for trends over time.

Regional spread, employer types and area of practice

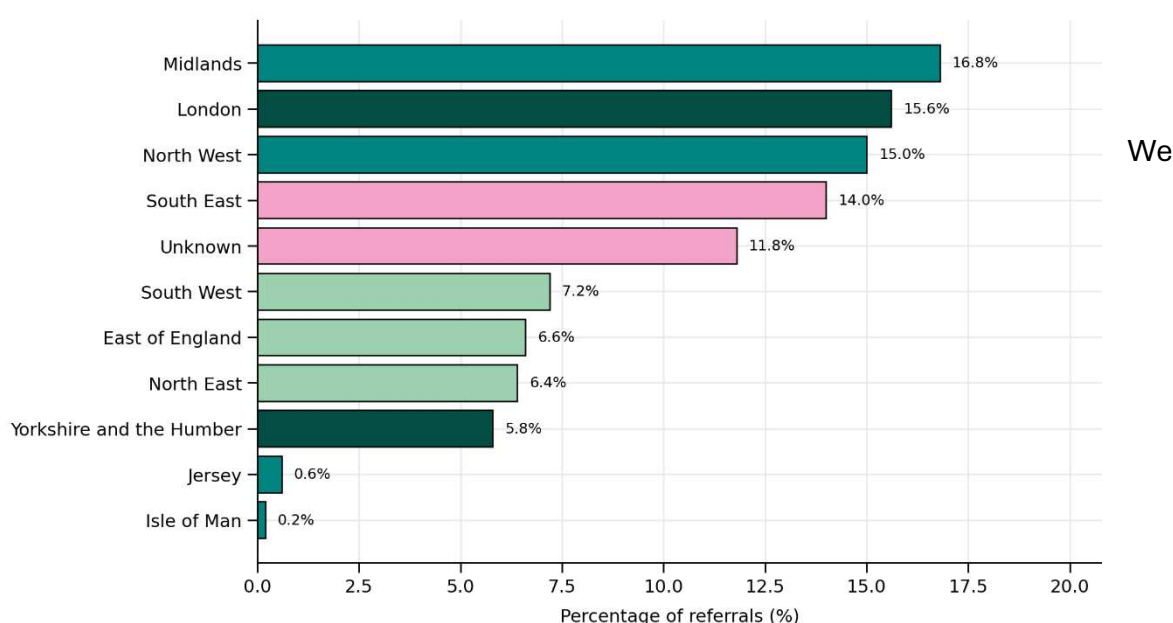
We wanted to understand where referrals are coming from and how this varies across different parts of the country, employment settings or areas of practice. This information was coded for the 500 pre-triage cases we sampled where available, in line with the following:

- When we discuss ‘region’, we mean the region where the social worker works or is employed, which can differ from where they live.
- Employer types were kept high level (local authority, NHS, agency, private, independent, public body) due to the level of information provided. Public body is predominantly Cafcass.
- We limited area of practice to either children's or adult's social work.

‘Unknown’ sources of region, employer type or area of practice were mainly caused by:

- Self-referrals, as we do not currently ask for the registrant’s employment information in the self-referral form.
- Referrals from complainants who could not identify the registrant’s employer.
- No data on current employer in the Data tab within our case management system.

Chart 5: Percentage of referrals across regions within sample



referred to our [Social Work in England: Emerging Themes](#) and [Social Work in England: State of the Nation](#) reports, which include breakdowns of number of social workers by region based on registration data, to test whether referral rates seem proportionate across regions (for example, lowest vs highest number of social workers). It should be noted that this data is from 2021 and 2022 and will not reflect current numbers of social workers, as our register has grown. However, both historic reports align in terms of the proportion of social workers across each region, which gave us a starting point for comparison.

Regional breakdown of social workers as of 2022:

- The North West (14,801), Midlands (17,759), London (17,761) and South East (14,094) had the largest number of social workers – which aligns with these regions having the highest number of referrals within our sample.

- The East (9,435), South West (8,936) and Yorkshire and the Humber (10,663) were similar in terms of number of social workers – and as we would expect, have lower referral rates.
- **The North East (5,265) had the lowest number of social workers – but a higher referral rate than Yorkshire and the Humber**, which has double the number of social workers.

We could take steps to better understand whether register size and composition could be having an impact on the number of referrals that we receive. It may be beneficial to undertake an annual check of the regional breakdown of social workers vs regional referral rates, as our data quality improves. This could also be triangulated with knowledge on workforce issues or trends across regions drawn from our employer single point of contact (SPOC) network and wider engagement with social work employers.

From our [registration and fitness to practise data](#), we can see the number of registered social workers on our register has grown by 4.14% since March 2024 from 102,861 to 106,521. From our engagement with other regulators, we have learned that growth in the register is considered a factor that can lead to an increase in referrals. Some regulators monitor the referral rate per 100 registrants to help track this over time. This could also be calculated region by region.

Chart 6: Percentage of employer types within sample

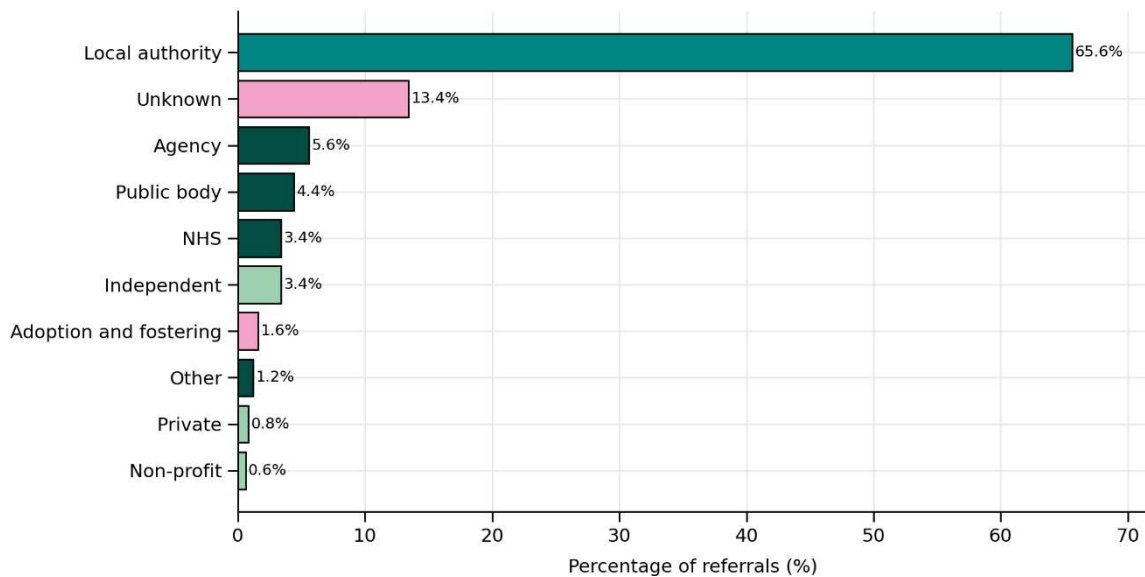
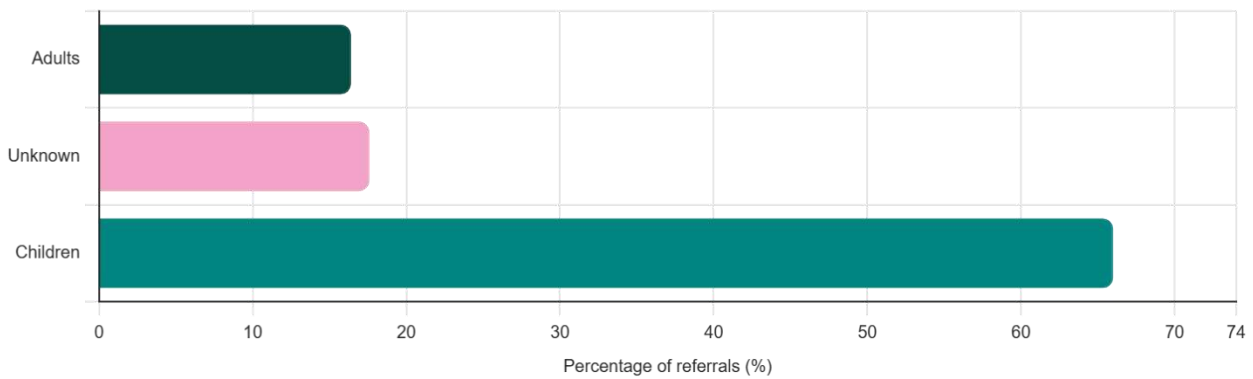


Chart 7: Area of practice within sample

practice within sample

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- **The majority of referrals analysed were linked to registrants working in local authorities (65.6%),** followed by agency (5.6%) and public body (4.4%) if we discount unknowns.
- **The most common area of practice was children’s social work (66%)** which far outweighed the number of referrals linked to adult's social work (16.4%).

This suggests that if we want to target any engagement or campaigns in relation to employers raising referrals with us – or in relation to the information that they provide to service users on when to raise a concern with the regulator - we should prioritise local authorities and children’s social services teams.

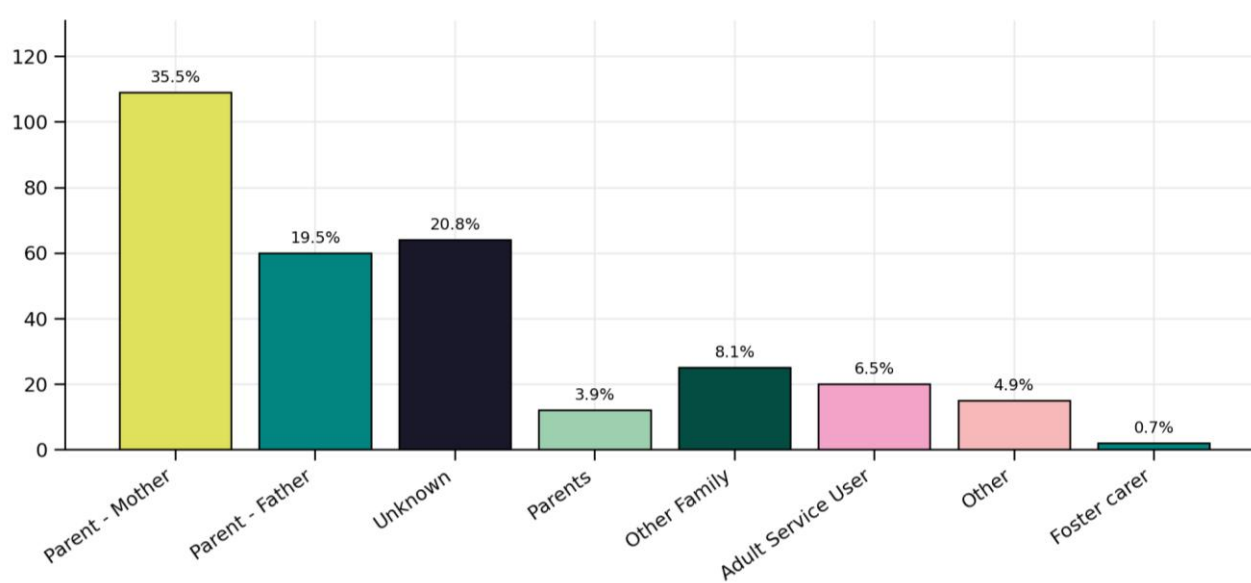
Understanding members of the public

We wanted to further understand who members of the public are, to better consider why members of the public raise concerns with us. This involved identifying, where possible, the reason why a complainant had contact with the registrant (or registrants) that they wanted to raise a concern against.

There were occasions when it was not possible to identify the relationship between the complainant and the registrant, due to lack of detail within the concern summary.

Chart 8: Member of the public referrals within sample by role/relationship to registrant

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Within the sample:

- **Most members of the public who raised concerns with us are parents (58.9%).**
- Most parents who raised concerns with us were linked with a registrant working in children's social work (96.1%).
- **More mothers (35.5%) raised concerns with us than fathers (19.5%).** In most cases when a parent has raised a concern – they appeared to have done so individually.
- We identified 12 occasions where parents had raised concerns jointly (3.9%)
- Other family members (8.1%) such as grandparents, children of adult service users, aunts or uncles, may also raise concerns with us.
- **When service users raised concerns with us directly, they are most likely to be adults (6.5%)** receiving support from adult services rather than young people or children receiving support from a social worker.
- **The majority of member of the public complainants knew the registrant because of a professional, rather than personal, relationship.** However, there were a small number of cases (4.9%) where the complainant was a neighbour, friend, ex-partner or colleague.

Our overall analysis suggests that there may be merit in considering how best to reach target audiences who may consider raising a concern to us, for example, parents of children receiving support from children’s social services, particularly mothers.

We should also consider whether this group is currently sufficiently involved in our engagement with people with lived experience of social work, in the development of guidance on how to raise concerns with us, or in any user testing we target at members of the public to inform the design and content for our website, or our referral form.

Complainants raising multiple referrals

During our analysis we observed occasions where the same complainant had raised multiple concerns about several registrants.

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We made efforts to track when multiple referrals had been made by the same complainant, which was possible due to being able to match the complainant’s details across pre-triage cases. Within our sample of 500 cases:

- 39 individual complainants were identified as having raised a total of 133 concerns or **26.6% of the number of cases analysed.**
- Most complainants raising multiple concerns were members of the public.

In some cases, a single member of the public had raised 7-8 concerns about multiple registrants. This often reflected a complex case history involving contact with many social workers, their supervisors or managers, and sometimes senior staff who became involved in a local complaint process. As we were working with a random sample of referrals within each quarter, it is possible that these complainants had raised further concerns that we did not capture.

As we do not have a baseline of data to compare to, it has not been possible to identify any trends in relation to complainants raising multiple concerns to understand if this has changed over time.

Perceptions around raising concerns

As part of our analysis of pre-triage cases we looked for evidence within the concern summary of whether the complainant felt, or perceived, that they had raised their concerns elsewhere. We were specifically focused on the perceptions of members of the public as this group is our largest body of complainants. This involved looking for phrasing that would indicate that the complainant had:

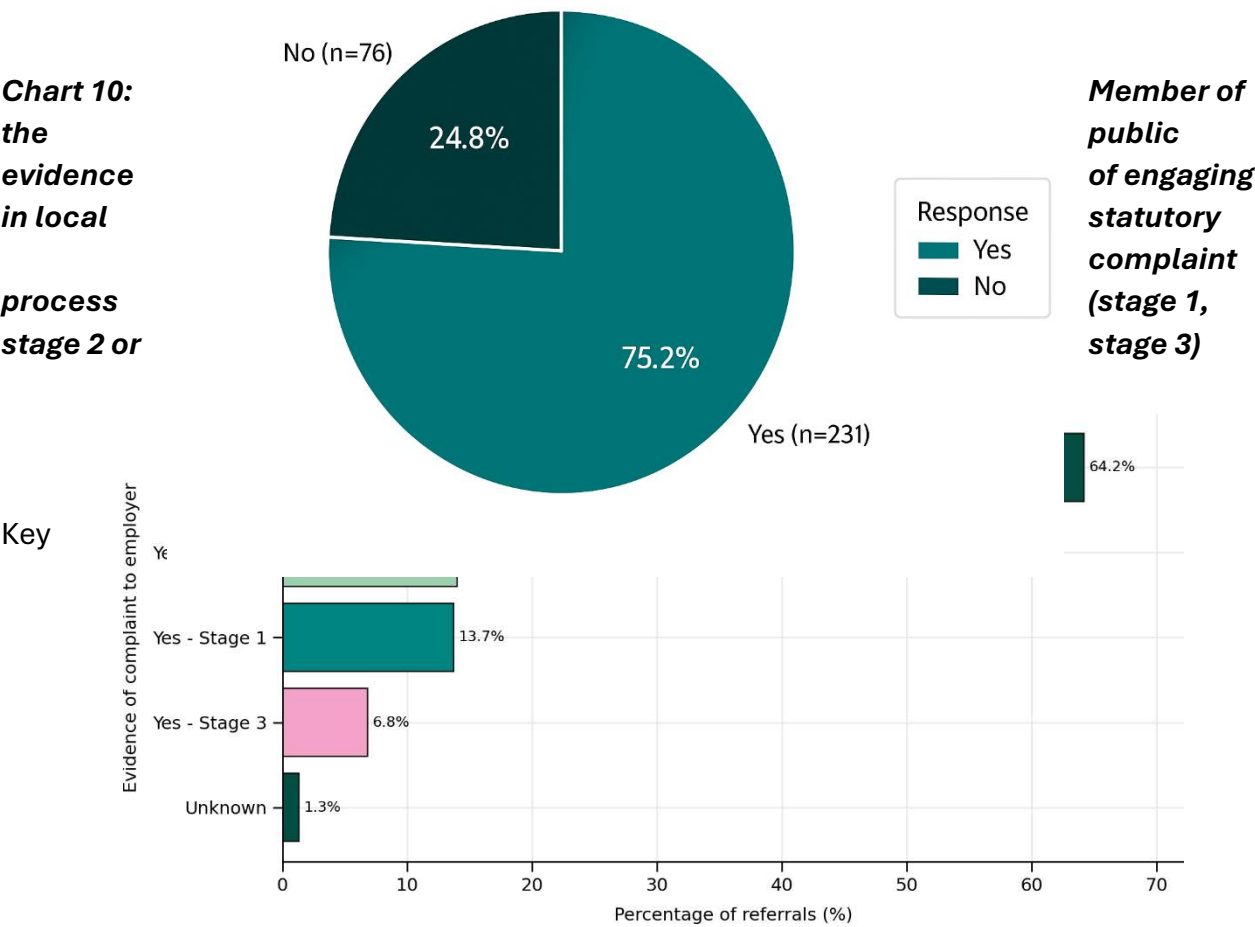
- Contacted other organisations, regulators or public bodies
- Raised a complaint with the social worker’s employer
- Raised their concerns with the social worker or their supervisor/manager
- Attempted to express their concerns, but had not felt listened to by professionals

We wanted to try and understand why complainants may feel that they have tried to resolve their concerns elsewhere before coming to us.

We coded separately for evidence of statutory complaints to local authority employers – as this is the strongest evidence we have that a complainant has tried to deal with their concerns locally through a formal process.

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Chart 9: Member of the public perception of having raised their concerns elsewhere



reflections on members of the public raising their concerns or pursuing complaints elsewhere:

- **The majority of member of the public complainants (75.2%) in our referral sample expressed that they felt they had raised their concerns elsewhere before coming to us.**
- Where members of the public expressed that they had not raised their concerns elsewhere, we found that this could be due to a lack of information about the registrant (for example, where they work), a lack of confidence for other organisations to take their concerns seriously, or a sense of confidence in our powers as a professional regulator.
- **The majority of member of the public complainants (64.2%) did not provide evidence of raising a formal statutory complaint (stage 1, stage 2 or stage 3) with a local authority employer.**
- 34.5% of member of the public complainants did provide evidence of being involved in a statutory complaint process with a local authority, with most complaints at stage 1 or stage 2 of the process.

It should be noted that as we were relying on the information provided by complainants, it may be the case that a member of the public has engaged with a statutory complaints process but has not provided evidence of this to us. Also, while most referrals we receive involve local authority employers (65.6%), this is not the case for all referrals, and we should

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consider what this means for a complainant who has tried to pursue their concerns elsewhere.

Likewise, we are limited in our understanding by having to interpret what complainants mean when they express a perception that they have raised their concerns elsewhere– was this through a formal process, or more informally by giving feedback or expressing dissatisfaction? If evidence was not provided at the point that they raised their concern, we would not be able to see this within the case summary. We cannot guarantee an accurate interpretation of complainant’s statements, as we did not have the opportunity to speak with them directly.

From our analysis we were able to understand that a member of the public may usually feel that they have raised their concerns elsewhere even if they have not described raising a complaint with the registrant’s employer. Within the referrals analysed, we found reference to members of the public raising their concerns with:

- Systems regulators such as Ofsted and the CQC
- The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
- The Information Commissioner’s Office
- The Office of the Public Guardian
- The police or a legal professional
- Politicians such as their local councillor or MP

We also found evidence in some cases of the complainant being signposted to raise a concern with Social Work England after raising their concerns elsewhere, with a great degree of variety in where this advice came from. We found examples of complainants being advised to raise concerns with us after:

- Speaking to their local councillor or MP
- Seeking advice from voluntary organisation such as Citizens Advice, charities which support victims of domestic violence (such as Women’s Aid), or charities supporting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees
- Speaking to other professionals such as support or case workers

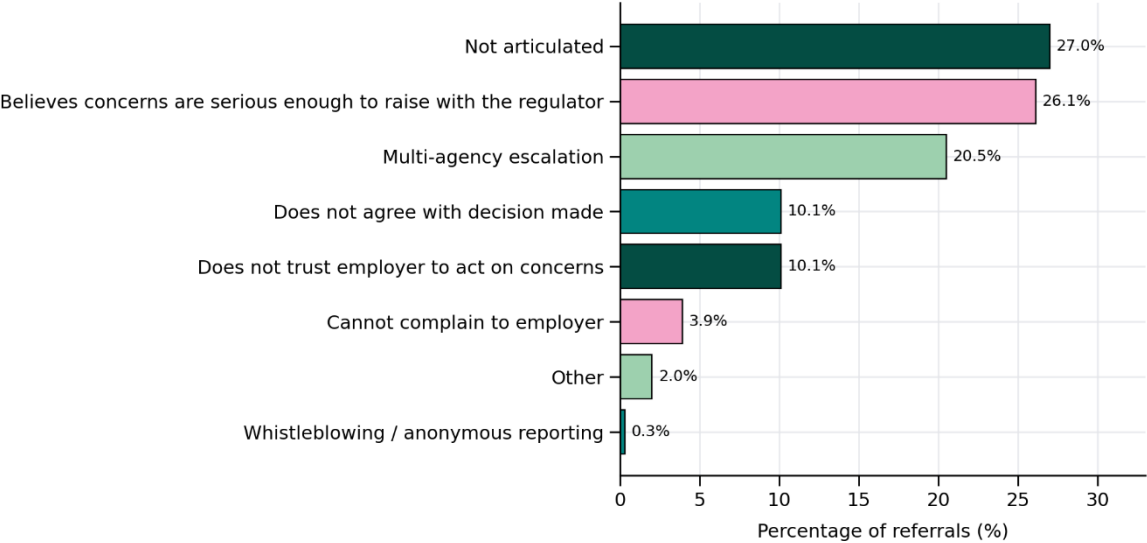
We do not explicitly ask complainants if they were signposted to raise a concern with us or how they knew to raise a concern with the regulator, so we are limited in our ability to understand this further.

Expectations and reasons for raising concerns

Through our analysis we tried to identify why members of the public had decided to raise concerns with us. Again, this relied on subjective interpretation of the information provided within the case summary, as complainants rarely expressed this explicitly. In many cases, this meant that their expectations were not clearly articulated enough for us to draw reliable conclusions.

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Chart 11: Thematic reasons for why members of the public may raise a concern with us



Where expectations were expressed sufficiently to allow for thematic analysis we found the following:

- **26.1% of member of the public complainants used language or phrasing which suggested a strong belief that their concerns were serious** and therefore appropriate to raise with the regulator
- **20.5% of cases provided evidence of multi-agency escalation**, with complainants feeling that now was the appropriate time to involve the regulator
- 10.1% of cases suggested that the complainant was unhappy with an outcome or decision, and wanted the regulator to intervene as an independent body
- 10.1% of cases included language or phrasing which indicated a lack of trust in the registrant’s employer, which was most common if the employer was a local authority
- In 3.9% of cases the complainant expressed that they could not complain directly to an employer, for example, because the registrant was self-employed

When we consider perceptions of seriousness from members of the public, this did sometimes include direct reference to fitness to practise and areas of our professional standards. In other cases, we picked up on language that described fear, harm, abuse of power, discrimination or prejudice – and an appeal for someone in a position of independent authority to intervene.

More generally, we observed that there was frequently a sense from members of the public that they did not feel listened to and were looking for someone to validate their experience and ultimately take their side.

We also captured that employers are most likely to raise concerns with us due to:

- An internal investigation, which may have resulted in disciplinary action or dismissal.
- Because they have been informed of a police investigation.

And for self-referrals:

- Notification of action by the social worker's employer (investigation, disciplinary, dismissal).
- Change in health.
- Ongoing police investigation or caution.

System Wide Trends

This section summarises our efforts to explore system wide trends in the external environment which may have an impact on referral rates. We focused on trends which could offer evidence to suggest a rise in frustration, or cause for complaints, among members of the public - particularly those parents and families who have had contact with children's social services. This included looking at trends in complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman, whether local authorities may be experiencing an increase in complaints, and backlogs within the Family Court system.

Learning from our engagement with other regulators, we also wanted to consider the potential impact of news stories about social work and whether this could be raising public awareness of our role. Lastly, we were conscious of society-wide changes in access to, and use of, generative AI over the past financial year. We have considered how this could be influencing the information that people use when they are thinking about raising a concern.

Complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) is the independent body that investigates complaints about local authorities, including children's services and social care, once internal council complaints have been exhausted.

The LGSCO publishes [annual complaint data](#) on the total number of complaints received by each council, this is broken down by service area (Education, Children's Services, Adult Care, Housing etc). However, before 2023-2024 data relating to complaints received about Children's Services was grouped with education, limiting the detail of our insight before this period.

In 2024-2025 the LGSCO received a record 20,773 complaints in total across England, a 16% increase compared to the 2 preceding years. For comparison, the LGSCO received 16,570 complaints in 2022-2023 and 17,937 in 2023-2024.

- In 2023-2024 1,907 complaints were received about Children's Services; 41% were assessed and closed, 37% were unready for investigation, and 22% were investigated. Of complaints investigated 81% were upheld. Most upheld complaints related to **delays in statutory complaints procedures (19%) or child protection (17%)**.
- In 2024-2025 2,131 complaints were received about Children's Services; 43% were assessed and closed, 38% were unready for investigation, and 19% were investigated. Of complaints investigated, 80% were upheld. Most upheld complaints related to **child protection (20%) and delays in statutory complaints procedures (17%)**.
- In 2023-2024 2,499 complaints were received about adult's services; 32% were assessed and closed, 35% were unready for investigation, 33% were investigated. Of

complaints investigated, 80% were upheld. Most upheld complaints related to **charging (26%) and assessment (23%)**.

- In 2024-2025 2,777 complaints were received about Adult's Services; 36% were assessed and closed, 30% were unready for investigation, and 34% were investigated. Of complaints investigated, 78% were upheld. Most upheld complaints related to **charging (25%) and assessment (23%)**.

In its annual reporting, the LGSCO reflects that systemic problems across local government are driving increases in complaints from members of the public, reaffirmed by the high level of fault that their investigations find – with 83% of complaints upheld. Across the past 2 years, complaints to the LGSCO about adults' and children's services have both increased by around 11%.

We can observe a high number of complaints about children's services linked to delays in local statutory complaints procedures – and a 3% increase in complaints upheld linked to child protection specifically. We speculate that this trend could offer some insight into why referrals to us have also increased – either because of growing genuine concerns with the provision of services, or because members of the public are frustrated with delays to their local complaints and eager for resolutions.

Complaints to local authorities

From our analysis of pre-triage referrals, we can understand that the majority of 'member of the public' complainants (75.2%) believe that they have complained elsewhere before raising a concern with us. In some cases, this was accompanied by evidence of a Stage 1, 2 or 3 statutory Children Act complaint.

Complaints within this context typically arise after child protection conferences, parenting assessments, pre-proceedings letters, contact restrictions or placement decisions. Stage 1 statutory complaints aren't measuring service satisfaction but can instead be seen as an indicator of formalised disputes between parents and children's services.

To understand whether the number of Stage 1 complaints is rising, we analysed a small sample of complaints data from 10 English local authorities between 2023-2024 and 2024-2025. Across the sampled local authorities:

- In 2023-2024 983 Stage 1 statutory complaints were received.
- In 2024-2025 1347 Stage 1 statutory complaints were received.
- This suggests an increase across these authorities within one financial year.

The authorities included London, county, metropolitan and unitary councils, suggesting the increase may not be limited to a single type of area. However, this was only a small exploratory sample, and there may be authorities where complaints have decreased or remained stable over the same period.

If complaints are increasing this would mirror the trend experienced by the LGSCO over the past 2 years and may also indicate why we may now be experiencing an increase in referrals – as we would normally expect members of the public to complain to us after engaging with their local process.

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We have focused on a small sample at this stage, as data on Stage 1 complaints must be extracted from individual local authority reports. The way that data on complaints is reported varies between authorities, with some reporting combined total numbers of complaints in progress (across all 3 stages). Expanding our analysis to a wider sample of local authorities could be beneficial to confirm this initial indication that complaints are rising within children’s services, and to test whether this is impacting some regions or employers more than others.

It is not yet possible to include any complaints data for 2025-2026 as this will not be published until later this year. Including complaints data from this period would benefit our analysis considerably, as it would correspond with the full period in which we have been observing an increase in referrals.

Family court backlog

Family courts in England continue to have a significant backlog. This is of relevance to us as a regulator, if, as our analysis of pre-triage cases indicates, most of the concerns that we receive from members of the public are raised by parents and linked to social workers working in children’s services. Longer case durations mean that children and their families wait longer for permanent care decisions. This can increase the risk of harm and instability, while placing significant emotional strain on relationships within families and the professionals that they work with.

As of December 2024, there were 47,662 outstanding family court cases involving children including 10,121 public law (care and supervision) cases brought by local authorities. Reporting from the [National Audit Office](#) and [Committee of Public Accounts](#) indicates that:

- The average duration of public law cases in 2025 was around 37-38 weeks, significantly above the statutory 26-week target.
- As of late 2024, over 4,000 children were in public and private law cases lasting over 100 weeks.
- By the end of March 2025 the number of those waiting over 100 weeks had reduced by 48% for public law cases.
- Average duration varies regionally, with public law cases in London and the South East averaging around 53 weeks.
- Around 32% of public law cases had at least one hearing cancelled – with the need to reschedule hearings contributing towards delays.
- Workforce shortages of district judges, social workers and support staff are a factor in delays – with the impact of this varying regionally.
- Delays have been described as having particular impact for victims of domestic abuse, and there are concerns that staff including court staff, legal advisors and Cafcass staff are poorly resourced or trained to support domestic abuse victims.

While the backlog persists, it has reduced by over a quarter since its pandemic height in 2020. Using information published by [Justice Data](#), we can also see that the number of annual public law case numbers for family courts in England and Wales decreased by 12.4% between 2020 and 2024, falling from 18,261 in 2020 to 15,979 by 2024.

Full data is not yet available for case numbers in 2025, but projections from quarterly data suggest a slight year-on-year increase. For example, 4,213 public law cases started between Apr – June 2025, an increase of 10% vs the same period in 2024. Based on quarterly data, it is estimated that around 16,480 new cases will have started by the end of 2025, this is comparable with numbers in 2021 and 2022.

Even with an increase in case starts for 2025, public law case numbers have remained relatively stable since 2022. This poses a challenge for us when considering our rise in referrals, as we have not observed a comparable increase in referrals for previous financial years which could be explained by an increase in public law family court applications. When we consider average case duration, it is possible that pressures in the family justice system may be driven less by increasing case numbers and more by increasing case complexity.

Pressures across child protection and family justice systems

If we consider the fact that the number of public law care proceedings (care and supervision applications) has remained relatively stable, while statutory complaints to local authorities may be increasing – this could indicate that disputes between parents and children’s services are escalating but that these disputes are not yet translating into increased litigation volumes. This may suggest that more conflict is taking place during the pre-proceedings phase, and that when cases do progress to court, they may be more complex and take longer to resolve.

This would align with changes introduced to the [Public Law Outline](#) (PLO) in January 2023, which was updated and relaunched to combat family court delays. The PLO sets out the duties that local authorities have before making an application to court for a Care or Supervision Order. Since it’s relaunch, local authorities now undertake several assessments that previously would only have been required if the matter had progressed to care proceedings.

The media and information landscape

We became aware through our engagement with other regulators that there is a commonly held assumption that referrals may increase when the public is exposed to information which highlights that certain professionals are regulated. There is a belief that increased public awareness of professional regulation, and the role of professional regulators, can arise through a variety of circumstances such as: media coverage of professional misconduct and/or high profile cases, public campaigns, ease of access to information, political interest in regulation, or successful communication activity by regulators themselves.

Media coverage concerning social work

We carried out an informal review of some of the key media events over the past 5 years which we felt may have had an impact on referral rates, such as high-profile child deaths (Sharif, Hobson, Hughes). We also used Google Trends to explore patterns in Google searches relating to these media events and in relation to Social Work England.

As an example of this, we experienced our initial increase in referrals from December 2024 onwards, which coincided with significant media coverage of the Sara Sharif case. Press

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interest in the trial of her parents was sustained from October 2024 into January 2025, picking up again in late 2026 following publication of the child safeguarding practice review and subsequent announcement of an inquiry. It seems unlikely however, that coverage of this case, even across several months, would lead to such a persistent and sustained increase in the number of referrals received across a twelve-month period.

Using available tools, we were unable to prove any connection between media coverage of individual events and the number of concerns being raised with Social Work England. We found that variability in the number of searches for Social Work England is driven primarily by the registration window, with searches outside of this time relatively stable. However, our approach was limited through reliance on Google Trend data, which does not disprove that public awareness of regulation or regulated professionals is not influenced by coverage of events by the media.

Another consideration was whether [open reporting provisions in the Family Court](#), introduced from 27 January 2025, could have led to an increase in news stories focused on public law cases, such as those concerning care proceedings. We found several examples of media coverage of family court cases since the new provisions were introduced, including stories by national newspapers (The Independent, The Times, Metro) as well as case-based journalism from the BBC and ITV.

This was of interest to us because the change in provisions means that journalists are now able to report in detail on how individual family court decisions are made, the experiences of families (with anonymisation safeguards in place) and the role of other organisations or agencies in each case. This is a new area of potential scrutiny for social work and social workers, which while difficult to quantify in terms of its potential impact on referrals, is a development we should remain alert to.

Adoption of AI and accessibility of information

Public awareness and use of AI has increased steadily across the UK since 2024. The KPMG [UK Attitudes to AI](#) study found that by early 2025, 69% of people in the UK were using AI for work, study or personal tasks. [Ofcom](#) has observed that the public is interacting with AI generated content more often – even when not consciously aware. This is of interest to us because as use of AI expands within the general population, either through ambient adoption or explicit tool-use, it will change how members of the public seek, access and use information.

As an example of this, in August 2024 Google rolled out ‘AI Overviews’ in the United Kingdom. This means that a Google search now offers an AI summary as the top result, with links to further sources of information. A Google search for “how to complain about a social worker”, “complain about a social worker” or “unhappy with social worker” produces an AI Overview which explains as a step-by-step process how to approach informal resolution, make a formal complaint to a local authority, report professional misconduct (to Social Work England) or escalate a complaint to the Ombudsman.

These AI Overviews generally contain several direct links to the Social Work England webpage to ‘raise a concern about a social worker’. They also communicate that if the complaint is

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about matters such as “dishonesty, a breach of confidentiality, or inappropriate relationships” that a report should be made to the regulator. Similar searches within ChatGPT result in a response which advises that “if the issue is about professionalism, behaviour or ethics, you can also complain to Social Work England”.

This form of digital signposting by generative AI is a recent development which since 2024 has become increasingly accessible to the public as AI recommendations, summaries and augmented search results are embedded in applications and search engines. This means that if people are seeking information on how to complain about their social worker online, it is likely that they will be signposted to raise a concern with us.

4. Conclusions and/or recommendations

This research is a starting point in our attempt to better understand what we know about referrals and the people who raise concerns with us. Undertaking this work has helped to identify gaps in our data which will now be prioritised as part of the wider FtP process review.

We know that improving our data capture processes and data quality will be integral to enabling us to establish better baselines and allow us to more accurately track, and report on, trends over time. Reflecting on the questions we have attempted to answer:

Why are referrals increasing?

Our engagement with other regulators indicated that they have struggled to answer the question of why referrals are rising, partly because it is too challenging to link cause and effect. There is a general sense that if referrals are rising across the regulatory system, that this may be reflective of external factors that are outside of our collective control – such as systemic pressures on public services, focus on professional regulation in the media, or it becoming easier for people to raise concerns (for example, due to advances in technology). Likewise, that changes in register size can influence referral rates.

We have found evidence of systemic pressures within the family court system, tentative evidence of rising statutory complaints to local authorities, and a clear increase in complaints to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. We focused on these external factors knowing that referrals from members of the public, particularly parents of children who are receiving support from children’s social services, comprise many of the concerns that we receive. These are all factors which could, in theory, produce an increase in referrals to us as a regulator – as a byproduct of relationship breakdown and potential conflict between service users and providers of social work services. But it remains challenging to definitively prove that this is why our referrals are rising.

Our register size has also grown in recent years. An increase in the number of registrants we regulate could also, in theory, lead to an increase in the number of referrals we receive from a range of complainant types. Enhancing our analysis of referral data in conjunction with our registration data could help us to understand the relationship between the size of our register, and the impact this may have on our fitness to practise pipeline. As an example of this, we have noticed a slight, but increasing, trend in self-referrals within the sample we analysed.

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Who is raising concerns with us?

We have demonstrated that it is possible for us to gain more insight into who is raising concerns with us, and that this may be an area for continued interest as we mature as a regulator. Developing a more nuanced understanding of who members of the public are, their demographics and their relationship to social work – could help us to improve our communications and guidance for specific groups, rather than a general audience.

Understanding that the majority of our referrals come from members of the public, and that the registrants most likely to be referred to us will be employed by a local authority and working in children’s social care - is something that we have always understood anecdotally. We now have initial evidence to affirm this assumption, which we should use to consider how we target engagement and our communication with employers, social workers and people with lived experience of social work.

Knowing this, we should take stock of the fact that the number of children in need or looked after by local authorities in England has remained persistently high in recent years. According to [child in need statistics](#) published by the DfE since 2024:

- The number of referrals to children’s social care services are up 1.8% (or 11,000 referrals)
- Completed assessments are up 0.9% (or 5,700 assessments)
- Children in need up 0.7% (or 2,900 children)

‘Children in need’ includes those on child in need plans, those on child protection plans, children looked after by local authorities, care leavers and disabled children – as well as those waiting for an assessment. It is reasonable to consider that the more children and families involved in children’s social care, the more potential complainants there are who may raise a concern with us.

What do referrers want/expect from us?

It has also been possible for us to gain a deeper understanding of what complainants may expect from us, though this is subject to limitations.

The concept of what complainants, specifically members of the public, may regard as serious links with our wider interest in seriousness. This is an area that we are already keen to explore further and to communicate externally, to help registrants understand why we may take forward concerns for investigation – and to improve public knowledge of the concerns we can, or cannot, investigate.

Many members of the public complainants appear to be raising concerns with us without first raising a formal complaint locally with the social worker’s employer. However, these complainants may still perceive that they have expressed or discussed their concerns elsewhere before coming to us. The current guidance on our [‘how to raise a concern page’](#) suggests that complainants should:

5. Check that you cannot resolve your concern with the social worker's employer

We get a large number of concerns that cannot, and should not, be resolved through a fitness to practise investigation. But while we're not able to investigate, we encourage you to discuss these issues with the social worker's employer.

The employer should be able to deal with issues that are not about the social worker's fitness to practise more quickly and effectively.

Before raising a concern about a social worker, discuss the issue with the social worker's employer (if possible).

Advising members of the public to 'discuss' an issue with an employer does not provide any information on the statutory complaints process within local authorities or offer signposting on how to raise a complaint locally. It is not unreasonable to assume that a complainant might feel that they have 'discussed' an issue with an employer without engaging in any formal process. It is also not clear what it would mean to 'check that you cannot resolve your concern' with an employer. Again, this could be open to a large degree of interpretation, and we make no reference to raising a formal complaint. We are considering whether this advice could be improved to support more effective signposting.

We are also considering those circumstances where it is not possible for a complainant to easily raise a concern with a registrant's employer, and what guidance we offer for people who find themselves in this situation.

Next Steps

We are currently sharing the findings from our initial research internally and externally, ensuring that this work informs areas such as the fitness to practise process review, our continuing exploration of EDI in fitness to practise, and our ongoing engagement with employers. This includes considering the data we capture in relation to referrals.

Any plans for further research will need to be developed as we establish our new research function, considering capacity and timescales alongside other work priorities for the coming financial year. However, there are areas which may benefit from further monitoring or exploration such as:

- Further pre-triage case analysis with a focus on concern type
- Further pre-triage case analysis which looks further back in our case history
- Ongoing monitoring of external trends within local complaints, ombudsman and family courts
- Engagement with employers about their experiences of Stage 1, 2, 3 statutory complaints