

Preparing for practice: social work education in England



Reflections from our first
5 years of regulation
2025



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Foreword

Social work education sits at the heart of public protection, which is our overarching objective at Social Work England. This publication captures our unique perspective as the regulator for social work in England. It spotlights learning from our first full reapproval cycle of 257 qualifying social work courses. It shares data from our approval and monitoring of education providers and explores how social work education is evolving in response to changes across wider society. It reflects the shared responsibility we have, with educators and employers, to prepare social workers for practice.

We regulate every qualifying social work course in England against our education and training standards to ensure that students who successfully complete a course can meet our professional standards. The graduates who join our register go on to protect, support and empower some of society's most vulnerable people. The quality of their education and training must provide the very best foundation for students to enter the profession. They need to be ready to thrive in this rewarding yet challenging career, support individuals, families and communities, and able to continuously develop in their roles.

The insights and analysis from our regulation and our relationships with education providers are shaping our future directions in education and training. This includes our intended review of education and training standards and will inform our future approaches to inspections. We will continue to work with those across the education sector to ensure students develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for contemporary practice. We also understand that everyone supported by a newly qualified social worker must feel reassured that they will experience a consistent standard of practice, wherever that person qualified.

Our inspections have revealed inspiring stories of excellence and innovation within social work education. Despite financial pressures within the higher education sector and the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions have demonstrated creativity and adaptability. From embracing hybrid learning models to exploring the benefits and limitations of artificial intelligence (AI), the sector has shown that challenges lead to positive change.



There are also strong examples of involving people with lived experience of social work. Their insights are essential in helping students understand the impact of their future practice. Co-production supports social work's core values and ensures courses remain grounded in real-world experience. It is crucial that students and apprentices gain experience through practice based learning, supported by the vital role of practice educators in mentoring, teaching and assessing the next generation of social workers. Our [research into practice education](#) revealed how rewarding and motivating practice educators find their roles, while highlighting the challenges that may cause a social worker to step away from practice education.

Increasing the diversity of people applying for social work courses must continue to be a focus. Students from all backgrounds must receive the support they need to enrol on courses, qualify and stay in their careers. Valuing a breadth of experience amongst learners through a commitment to equality and inclusion can only strengthen our profession.

We acknowledge that there are challenges facing the higher education sector and social work employers, which may intersect and impact on social work education and training. Financial and staffing pressures can impact the availability of practice based learning opportunities, for example, and at the same time, social work courses are operating in a tight fiscal environment within the broader higher education sector. Through our Education and Training Advisory Forum (ETAF) and our close working relationship with course providers, we are ensuring that we remain live to these issues and can have honest conversations about the challenges that education providers face, providing support where we can within our regulatory remit.

I want to thank everyone who contributed to this publication and who have worked with us to shape our regulation of social work education over the past 5 years. With particular thanks to education providers, students, practice educators, people with lived experience, our inspection teams and our ETAF.



Colum Conway
Chief Executive,
Social Work England

Introduction

What is social work?

Social workers protect, support and empower people to improve their chances in life. They also protect people from harm where necessary. They provide a voice for those that need it, advocate for a fairer society and promote the human rights and wellbeing of those they support.

Why choose social work?

There are many different reasons why people choose a career in social work. Social work attracts people from all stages of life, including those new to their careers, people who have experience working or volunteering in social care or related roles, and people changing careers altogether. We know that having experience of using social care services can be a motivating factor in encouraging people to explore social work as a profession. This diversity strengthens the profession and those they support benefit from the workforce's wealth of knowledge and experience.

"I had social care involvement from the age of 5 years old, until my teenage years, due to severe neglect. I was inspired to be a social worker from a very young age. I don't know where I would be today without my social worker. Growing up on a council estate, surrounded by drugs and alcohol and many negative influences around, I am proud to say social work changed my life."

Social work student

"I am a care leaver, and I wanted to make a positive difference to other looked after children. I have seen and experienced the impact of good social work practice and the effects of not having the right support or guidance."

Newly qualified social worker

The role of Social Work England

Social Work England is the regulator of all social workers in England, established under the [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#). Our role is to protect the public by regulating social workers and social work education providers, enabling positive change and improving lives.

Since becoming the regulator in December 2019, we have established and maintained the register of social workers. Our register ensures that only those who meet our professional standards can use the title of social worker and can practise in England. We also oversee social work education and training, setting and monitoring standards to ensure that qualifying courses prepare students for safe, competent practice.

For the first 5 years of our regulation, our focus has mostly been on qualifying courses for social work. However, we have increasing oversight of post-qualifying courses for approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) and best interests assessors (BIAs). Working with our Practice Education Development Group (PEDG), we are also looking at the role of practice education and the courses that train practice educators. We are exploring further options to support this critical area.


We are also connecting to broader reforms in the post-qualifying landscape, working closely with our colleagues in government to collaborate and streamline wherever possible.

Why are social work courses regulated?

The title 'social worker' is legally protected, meaning only those who have completed the required training and maintain their registration with us can use it. Registration is vital for public protection. It ensures social workers meet the requirements set out through legislation to perform their important role in society.

We approve all qualifying social work courses in England against our [education and training standards](#). This process maintains public confidence that graduating students and apprentices can practise safely and effectively when they apply to join the register. It also ensures that they meet our professional standards upon entering the profession.

"I studied social work straight after my A levels when I was 18. At the time, my two sisters who I was living with also were studying. All 3 of us experienced hardship including homelessness; I witnessed wonderful practitioners but also poor practice. This made me want to study social work."
Social work apprentice



The aim of this report

We are committed to learning about social work in England through our regulatory processes, our research and our unique oversight of the whole profession. Over our first 4 years, we shared our reflections on qualifying social work education and training in the following publications:

- January 2021 – [Social Work in England – First reflections](#)
- January 2022 – [Social Work in England – Emerging Themes](#)
- March 2023 – [Social Work in England – State of the Nation](#)

This report is our first publication focused solely on social work education and training. It examines our journey as the regulator of social work education, from the implementation of our new education and training standards in September 2021 to the end of our first ‘reapproval cycle’ in 2025. It shares what we have learnt about the effectiveness of education and training in preparing social workers for practice.

We have also taken the opportunity to reflect more broadly on the changes we have seen which impact social work education and training, and consider how these changes are shaping our approach to regulation.

How did we produce this report

This report draws on data and insight from our regulation and quality assurance of social work education providers. It also considers our insights from the [Education and Training Advisory Forum](#) and Practice Education Development Group.

We surveyed education providers about their experience of our inspections of social work courses. We also hosted a series of interviews with our education quality assurance inspectors, academics, practice educators, newly qualified social workers, apprentices and students to hear about their experiences.

“Before I considered becoming a social worker, I had limited awareness of the profession and its values. My interest was sparked through various encounters with friends and family members who were social workers. Each person provided different insight, from the emotional and physical demands of the role to the sense of purpose it offered. Over time, I began to recognise how my values aligned with those of the profession, prompting me to consider whether I could be a social worker. Social work’s wide range of roles also appealed to me, as I recognised, I would want opportunities for growth and change throughout my career.”

Newly qualified social worker



Executive summary

The shape of social work education in England

A rich social work education and training landscape is vital for developing professionals with the knowledge, skills and behaviours to provide the best support to people and communities.

The variety of routes into the social work profession help to support people from different backgrounds and circumstances to consider social work as a career. This helps build a diverse workforce.

We know from our approved list of courses that there are currently 355 qualifying social work courses in England, delivered by 75 providers. While the number of courses has increased by 58 (19.5%) since we last reported in 2023, the number of education providers delivering courses has decreased by 8 (9.6%).

Calculating the exact number of social work courses and the balance of routes across an academic year can prove challenging. This is because we continue to approve and monitor courses that are coming to an end due to changes in provision, or because the course is planned for closure.

Overall, we can see that the number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses have both steadily increased since we first reported in 2021. Apprenticeships are driving this growth. In the past year we approved 44 undergraduate apprenticeship courses in total across England and 11 new postgraduate social work degree apprenticeships.

Although we do not register students or apprentices, we are exploring ways to use annual monitoring to understand the shape and size of social work cohorts. Our insights suggest that overall enrolments onto social work courses decreased slightly between 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024, by 3.1%.

However, enrolments onto undergraduate degree apprenticeships and fast-track routes increased during the same period. Our analysis of enrolment data is at an early stage. We will continue to explore ways for our annual monitoring of courses to gather useful data and intelligence, including being alert to any potential trends that may impact the future pipeline for the social work profession.

Reflections from regulating social work education

The regulation of social work education has evolved and changed often over the past few decades. Since we became the regulator for social workers in 2019 our approach has focused on building relationships with social work course teams and organisations with an interest in social work education and training.

We are especially keen to promote the value of involving stakeholders in the design, delivery and continued improvement of social work courses. It is important for people with lived experience of social work, social work practitioners and employer partners to be meaningfully engaged in preparing the social workers of the future.

Between September 2021 and March 2025, we inspected 257 social work courses against our education and training standards as part of our reapproval cycle. Of the 257 inspections:

- 48 courses were approved (with no conditions)
- 207 courses were approved (with conditions)
- 2 courses had their approval withdrawn

By the end of the reapproval cycle, 255 courses were approved. From an analysis of our reapproval inspection data, we have been able to understand where conditions were most likely to be applied against specific education and training standards. Conditions generally fell into one of 6 themes:

- strategic engagement of partners
- administrative matters
- provision of learning opportunities
- process development and implementation
- ongoing training
- sufficient resourcing

We have shared our reflections on why conditions were likely to be set, and the steps taken by education providers to meet conditions, in Appendix A.

Experiences of our reapproval inspections

We wanted to better understand experiences of our reapproval inspection process. To do this we held interviews with education quality assurance inspectors and social work educators. This helped us to explore their perceptions and how they felt at different stages of the inspection process.

Educators reflected on some of the challenges they faced when preparing for inspections. For example the volume of evidence required and the logistics of accommodating an inspection alongside their existing academic commitments. Likewise, inspectors reflected on their experiences of participating in inspections online, or via a hybrid model, compared with onsite events.

Overall, educators and inspectors were positive about their experience of inspections. They reflected that they felt well supported by Social Work England staff. There was a shared feeling between inspectors and social work educators that inspections were focusing on the right areas, and that the decisions made by Social Work England seemed fair.

Innovation, inclusivity and student experiences

Social work educators have demonstrated innovation, adaptability and flexibility in response to changes in wider society. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergence of new technologies including AI and virtual reality. Change can also present new risks and challenges. As social work practice evolves, course providers must balance innovation with the need to ensure opportunities for real world experience and face-to-face contact between students and apprentices, social work educators, and people with lived experience of social work.

Social work courses also continue to demonstrate positive trends in terms of recruiting applicants from diverse backgrounds. They often attract more people from black, disabled and low socio-economic backgrounds than other university level programmes. This is beneficial for the profession and for the communities that social workers work with, as social workers should reflect the diversity of experiences, views and backgrounds within our society.

However, we recognise that challenges persist regarding equality, diversity and inclusion. Students and apprentices may experience multiple, intersecting disadvantages. This may impact course progression and attainment, particularly for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, or for those with disabilities or who are neurodiverse. We are keen to ensure that regardless of background or circumstances, all social work students and apprentices receive the support they need to successfully join the profession.

We are mindful of the financial pressures facing many organisations, including higher education providers and local authorities. This can create challenges for course delivery, particularly practice based learning, as work-based opportunities are costly to organise and resource for both course providers and employer partners. At the same time, the rising cost of living has presented new challenges for social work students and apprentices. They may receive different levels of financial support and funding depending on their route into the profession. This means that the cost and overall experience of training to be a social worker varies widely.



Looking to the future

What we have learned, and are continuing to learn, about social work education in England will inform our approach to regulation in the years ahead. Working in partnership with providers and the social work sector, we will use our learning to improve the consistency and quality of courses, and the readiness of graduates for professional practice.

This includes reviewing our education and training standards where we propose to clarify and streamline some of our existing approach and guidance, based on the learning from our first reapproval cycle. Bringing our knowledge skills and behaviours framework (KSBs) into regulation will also strengthen consistency

in how different courses are preparing students and apprentices to meet the professional standards and begin their practice. We're also building a more in-depth knowledge of the practice education landscape to inform and support the critical role of practice educators, including exploring our role in regulating practice education.

We have been assured through the relationships that we have built with education providers, employers and educators that even during challenging times, social work education continues to evolve and strive to meet the needs of the profession and the public. We also know that there is always potential for improvement and innovation which we are keen to support.



Chapter 1: The shape of social work education in England



To join our register and practice as a social worker in England, applicants must have completed a recognised social work qualification. Achieving a recognised qualification demonstrates that the applicant has the knowledge, skills and behaviours to meet the professional standards required to practice safely and effectively. Part of our role is to assure the quality of all social work courses in England.

In this chapter, we describe the routes into the profession. We explore the current shape of social work course provision in England using data we have collected through our quality assurance and annual monitoring processes.

Routes into the profession

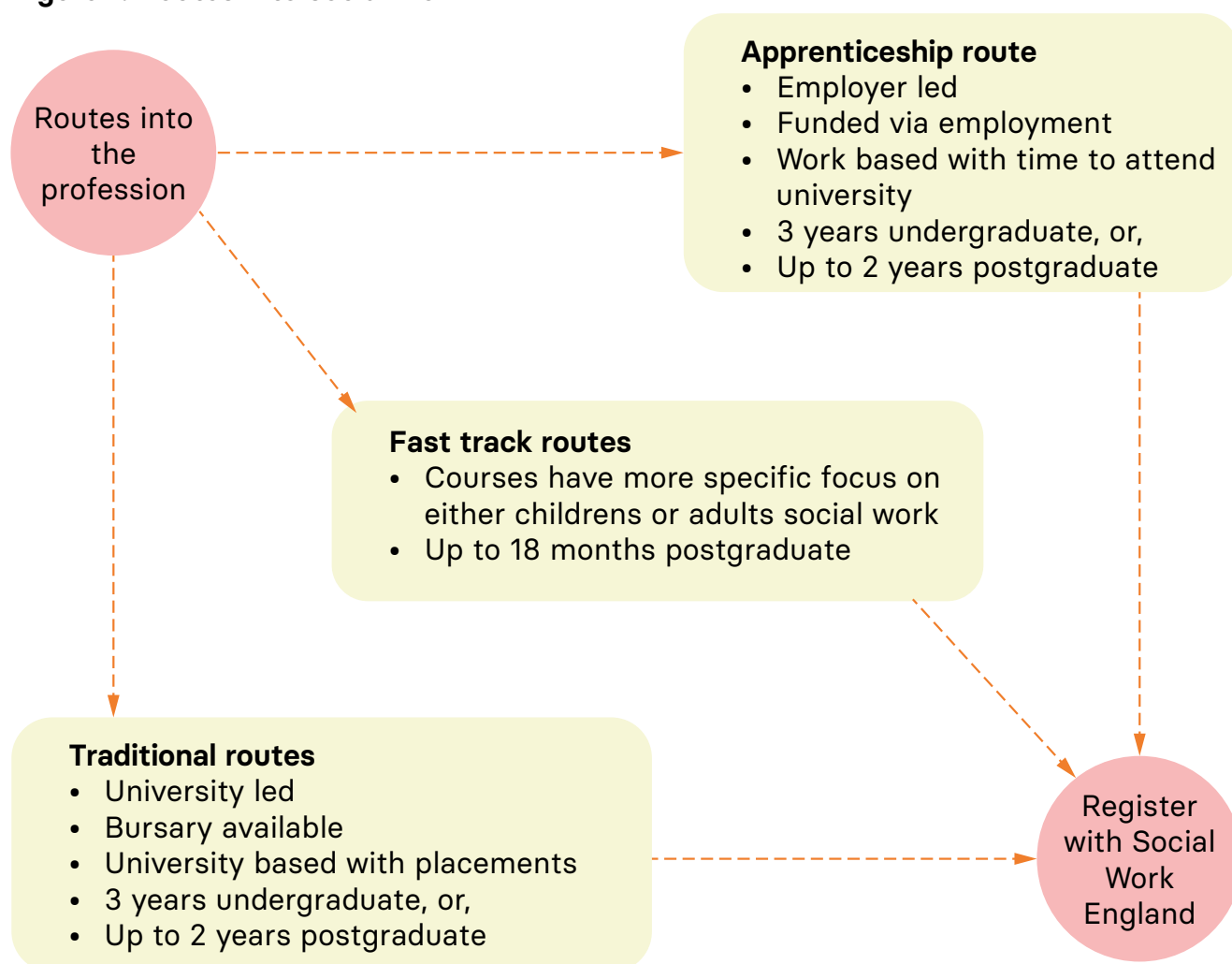
There are multiple qualifying routes for aspiring social workers to choose from. These include fast track programmes, apprenticeships and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Although social work courses in England must cover all aspects of social work, so that graduates may practice in any setting, some focus more on practice in either adults or children's social work.

The wide variety of routes into the profession can support applicants from different backgrounds and circumstances to consider social work as a career. When deciding which route to take and where to study, applicants may consider factors such as:

- how long it will take to qualify
- the level of qualification
- the cost of the course
- the focus of the course



Figure 1. Routes into social work



The traditional route continues to be the most common route into the profession. However, we are seeing a consistent increase in the number of apprenticeship courses. Though the learning element of an apprenticeship can be delivered at an undergraduate or postgraduate level, the social work apprenticeship standard is a level 6. As such, it is not currently subject to the recent changes in funding for level 7 apprenticeships.

Apprentice Social Worker Programme at Suffolk County Council and the University of Suffolk



This programme has been in place since 2019 and has recruited approximately 70 apprentices. It is designed as a 'grow your own' programme, providing a pipeline of newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) for the local authority. It has developed a clear work based career development pathway for existing staff who aspire to be social workers. It is widening participation through the recognition of existing practise-based experience as an alternative to meeting traditional academic entry requirements.

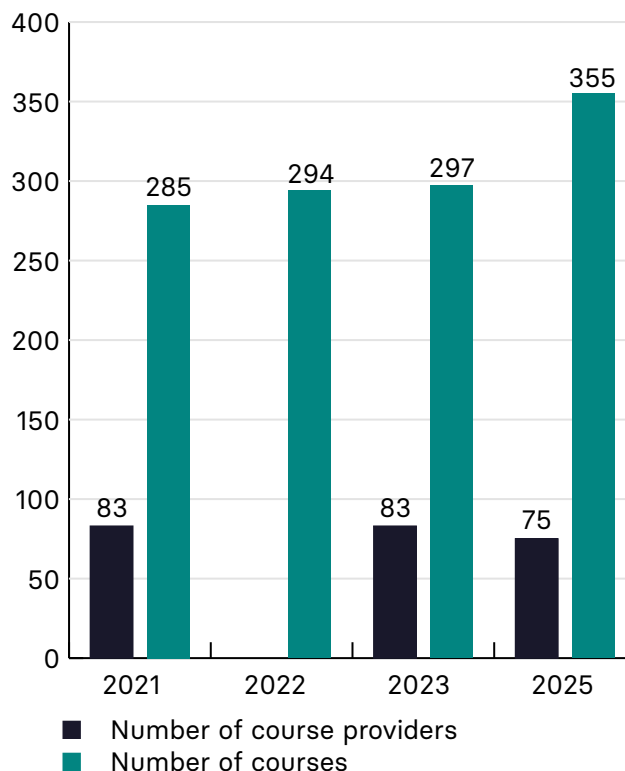
It also aims to strengthen the sharing of specific knowledge learned through the adoption of a rotational model. This enables apprentices to complete year long rotations in both adult and children's services. The rotational model is identified as a core strength of the programme. Working in 3 separate teams across both children's and adults settings supports the development of professional networking and laying foundations for integrated working post qualification.

Approved courses in England

In this section we share some of the data we have collected through our quality assurance of courses. Where possible, we compare current figures to those shared in our [social work in England reports](#). These provide data from 2021, 2022 and 2023, and offer reflections on how course provision has changed over the years.

As at August 2025 there were 75 course providers providing qualifying social work courses in England, delivering a combined total of 355 courses. This is an increase of 58 courses (19.5%), and a decrease of 8 course providers (9.6%), since we last reported in 2023.

Graph 1. Number of course providers and courses, as reported, by year



[note 1: Data was not published on the number of course providers in our 2022 social work in England report.]

From these figures, we can see that the number of course providers has remained relatively stable. Of the 8 course providers that no longer run social work courses, most were further education colleges. We understand that they were struggling to recruit enough students to their social work programmes to make them financially viable or were facing other organisational financial challenges. We withdrew approval from 2 course providers.

When a course provider decides to close a social work course, this starts a process which can take several years to complete. They will stop recruiting to the course, but the course will continue to run while any existing cohorts complete their studies. During this period, the course remains on our approved list of courses. This means that several of the courses which were removed from our approved list of courses between 2023 and 2025 had begun the process of closing their course in earlier years.

As an example of this, the Department for Health and Social Care has decided not to continue funding the [Think Ahead programme](#) for the 2026 cohort and beyond, while they review their broader approach to funding social work training. This could mean that the course will close in the future. However, in the interim, the course will remain on our approved list of courses until the current cohort graduates.

Course providers may also decide to close a course if they have created a new version to take its place. This normally reflects a significant change to the course such as a new course structure, validating body (particularly for college-based courses or fast track routes), or a revised curriculum. We have also seen examples of course providers changing the degree award from a Bachelor of Arts (BA) to a Bachelor of Science (BSc). This can mean that a course provider may have 2 approved courses running in parallel (the new course and the old version if students are still enrolled).

The number of social work courses increased steadily for the first 3 years of our regulation. And, since 2023, we have seen 58 courses added to our approved list. However, we believe that 26 of these courses are likely to close in the future as they are old versions of courses running in parallel to new courses. As a result, we may observe a decrease in course numbers over the next few years as cohorts graduate and these duplicate courses are removed from our approved list.

Social work courses by level of study

As at August 2025, 149 social work courses were undergraduate level, whereas 206 were postgraduate. This represents an increase of 20 (15.5%) for undergraduate, and 38 (22.6%) for postgraduate, since we last reported in 2023.

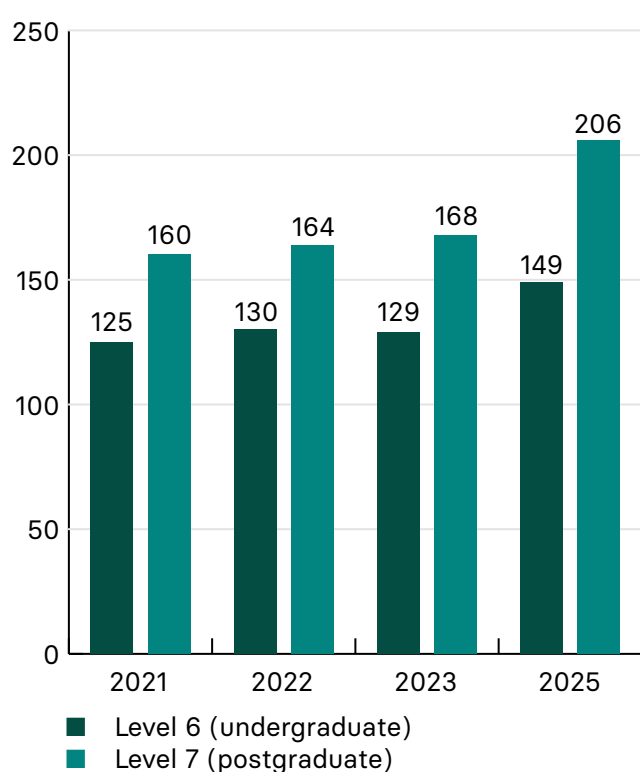
Postgraduate courses are also often approved as 2 qualifying routes. This includes the substantive course, and any exit route which could lead to registration with Social Work England. This can mean that when we approve a new postgraduate course it leads to us adding 2 courses to our approved list.

Exit awards explained

Exit routes or exit awards are where a student completes their studies before achieving the whole degree. In social work qualifications, this can appear in masters level courses, where some students may elect to exit with a Post Graduate Diploma (PG Dip) and choose not to complete, typically, a dissertation. Social Work England recognises PG Dips in Social Work as eligible for registration.

However, we are aware of 18 social work courses that may close in the future for other reasons. This includes 2 courses which have suspended recruitment for the coming academic year and 2 courses which haven't recruited for 2 years. This number includes government funded courses such as Step Up to Social Work, which must go through a tendering process to secure funding for future cohorts. If education providers do not secure funding, these courses may close.

Graph 2. Regulated social work courses in England by level of study, as reported, by year



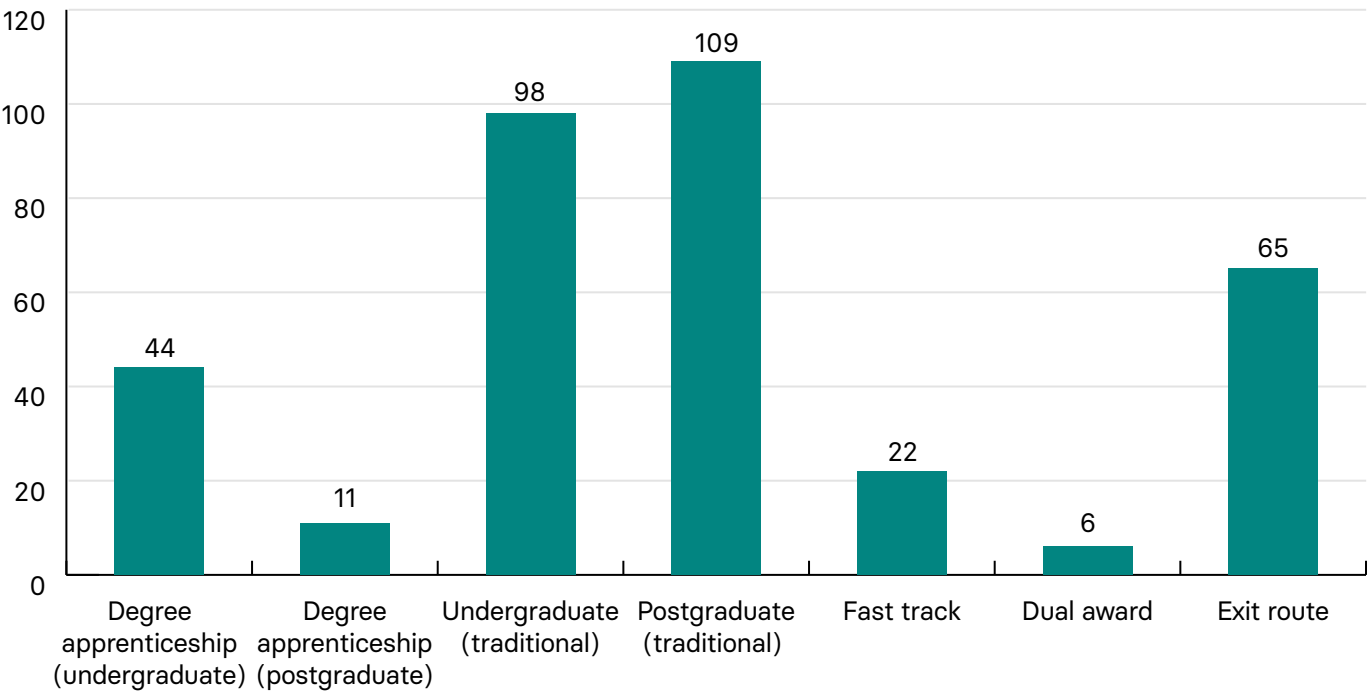
Through annual monitoring we can anticipate potential course closures. As reflected above, we expect 26 courses to close in the future because an education provider has developed a new version of the course.

Social work courses by route and award

'Traditional' university based courses continue to be the most common route into the profession (58.3% of current courses). However, we have observed an ongoing increase in the number of social work undergraduate degree apprenticeships. This has sometimes been offset by education providers closing other undergraduate work-based, part time or employment-based courses in favour of the apprenticeship model. We have also approved 11 new postgraduate degree apprenticeships over the past year and expect to see continued growth for this route, subject to continued government funding.

Anecdotally, the attractiveness of apprenticeship routes is likely to be based on 2 factors. Firstly, employers are keen to train their own social workers and reap the benefits of staff retention. By recruiting apprentices in-house, employers can provide career opportunities for existing social care staff who may have years of valuable skills and experience, making them ideal candidates for social work. Secondly, for the apprentices, they gain qualified status without losing a regular salary or incurring tuition fee debt, as the delivery of their course is largely funded by the apprenticeship levy.

Graph 3. Social work courses by route as at August 2025

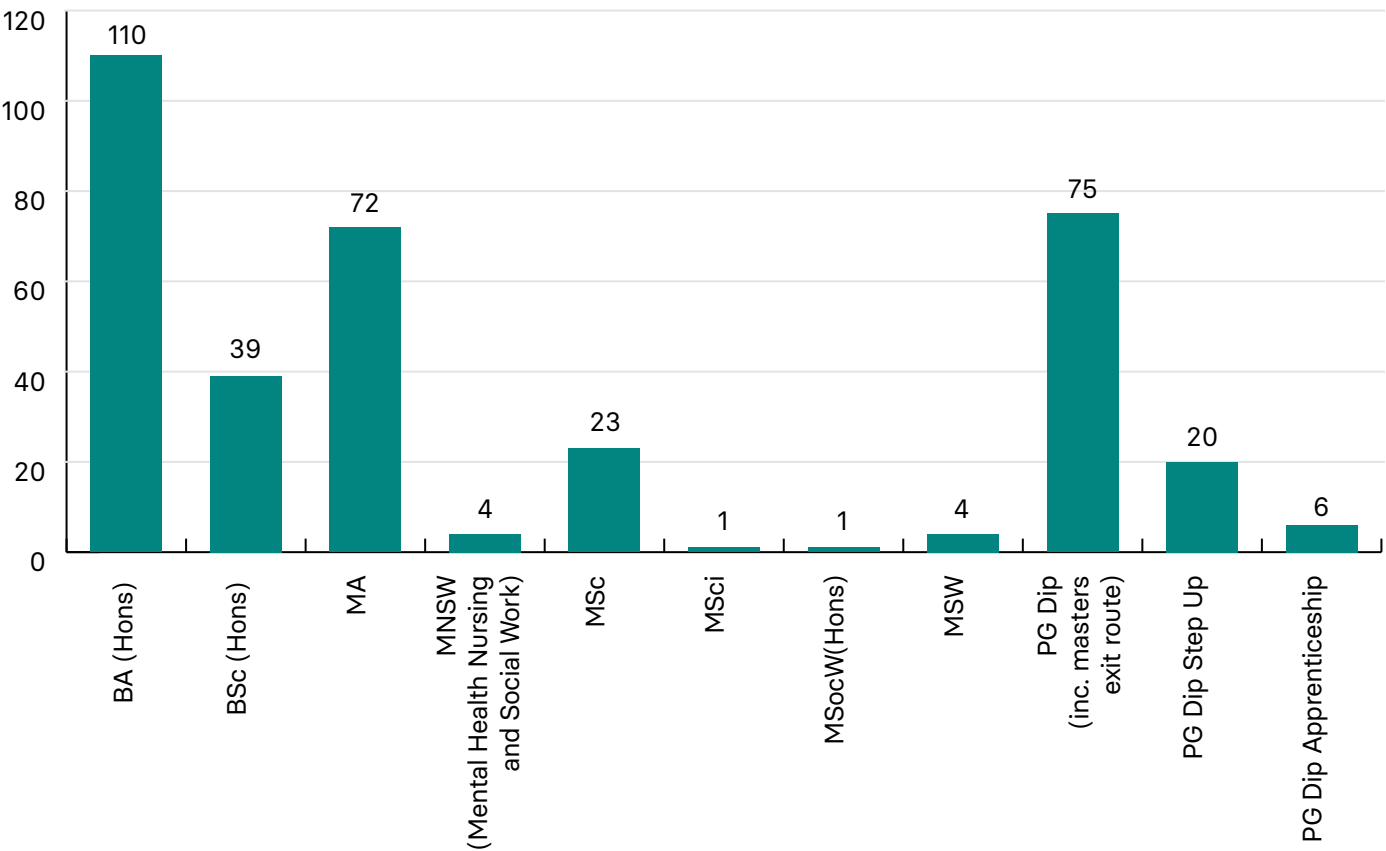


[note 2: fast track courses include Step Up to Social Work, Approach Social Work (formerly 'Frontline') and Think Ahead]

We can also explore provision by award type. We have been able to provide a more comprehensive breakdown than we have in our previous publications. As illustrated on the next page, social work courses can be delivered as bachelors or Master of Arts, or of science. This often reflects where the course is based within the university. For example, in some universities social work is aligned in faculties or departments with other allied health programmes. In other institutions, social work may be aligned with teaching, policing, counselling, psychology, law, or the social sciences.

These differences do not impact the eligibility of the final degree award in terms of registration with Social Work England. However, we have observed that the position of social work within an institution can influence aspects of course design and delivery. For example, aspects of the curriculum, central support for practice based learning, and opportunities for multidisciplinary learning with students from other programmes.

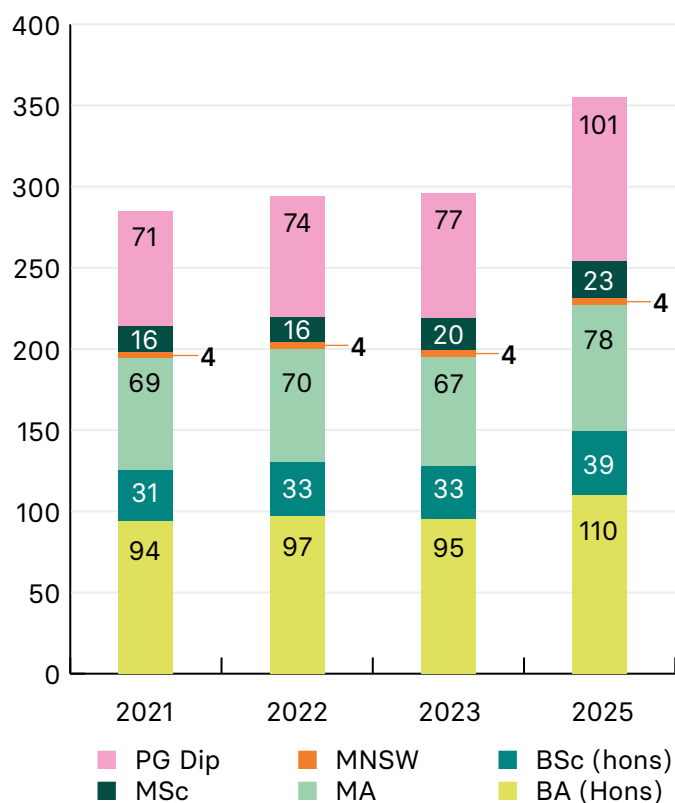
Graph 4. Social work courses by award as at August 2025



[note 3: The postgraduate diploma includes the Postgraduate Diploma Masters exit route. This is an option for postgraduate students who are unable or choose not to complete the dissertation element of their course.]



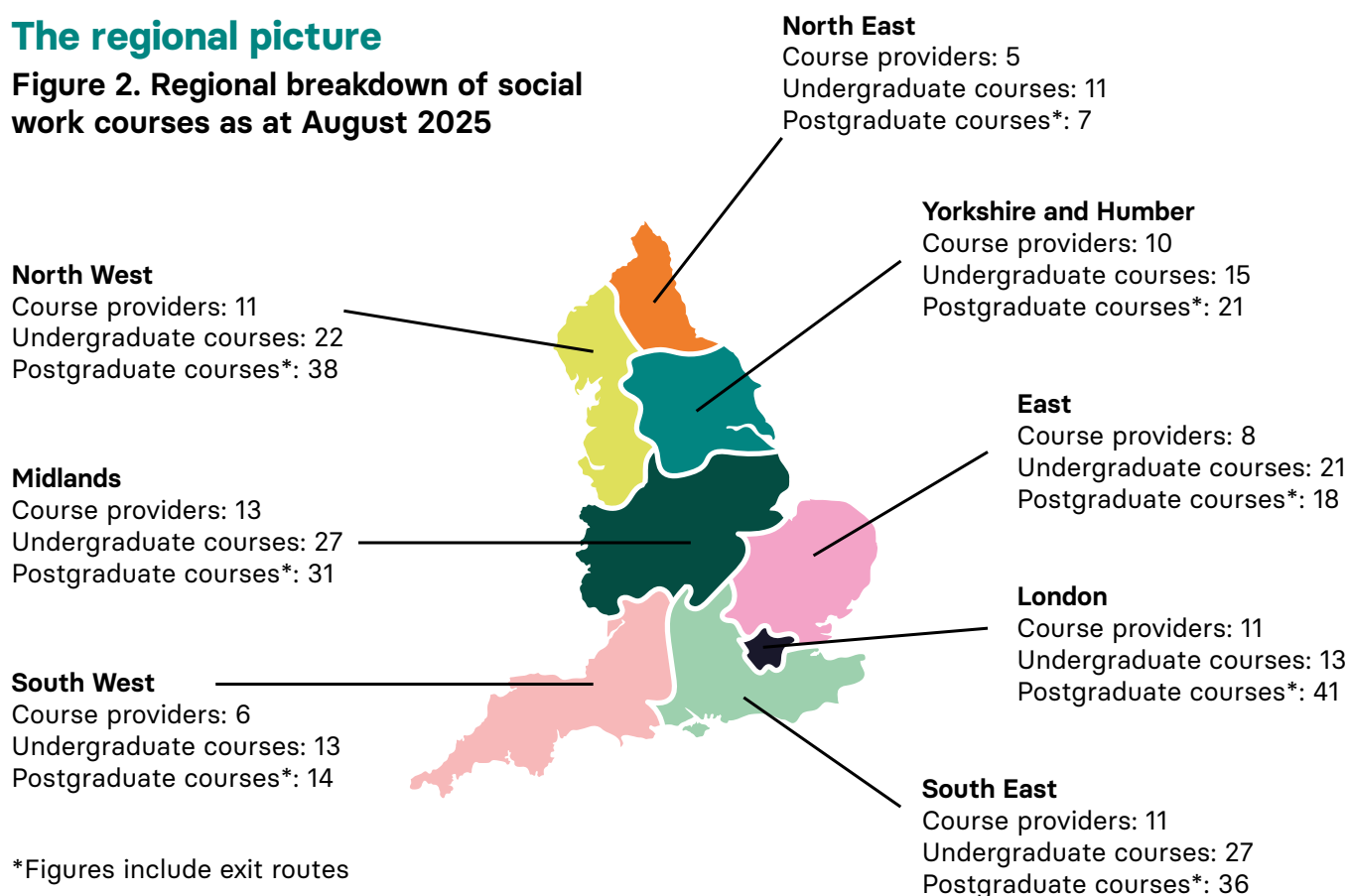
Graph 5. Social work courses by award, as reported, by year



We can observe, that over time, the number of undergraduate social work courses has gradually increased. This is largely driven by the approval of new apprenticeships. Likewise, there has been growth in the number of courses being delivered as Postgraduate Diplomas (PG Dips). This reflects growth in fast-track routes such as Step Up to Social Work and the postgraduate degree apprenticeship route. There are also an increased number of course providers offering an exit award for their masters level programmes.

The regional picture

Figure 2. Regional breakdown of social work courses as at August 2025





We last reported on a regional breakdown of social work courses in 2023. Since then, the number of course providers has remained static across Yorkshire and Humber, the South East, the North West and the North East of England. The number of course providers has decreased from 14 to 13 in the Midlands, 16 to 11 in London, 7 to 6 in the South West and from 9 to 8 in the East of England.

Across all regions, the number of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses has increased.

Approved mental health professionals and best interests assessors

In 2024 we published new education and training standards for approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) and best interests assessors (BIAs). In September 2025, we launched new inspection models

which allow us to quality assure all AMHP and BIA courses in England against the new standards. This has never been done for BIA courses before.

Through the implementation of these standards, we aim to improve education and training for mental health and mental capacity professionals in England. This will help to ensure that everyone who qualifies from these higher education courses can practise safely and effectively.

At the time of writing, the government has announced that it intends to implement the Liberty Protection Safeguards (LPS) to replace the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) legislative framework. This would also create the new role of approved mental capacity professional (AMCP), which would replace that of BIA. We will continue to monitor plans for implementing LPS and the impact it could have on our regulation in this area.

AMHPs and BIA explained

AMHPs work on behalf of local councils to carry out a variety of functions under the Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended). One of their key responsibilities is to coordinate care arrangements for people in mental health crisis. They identify the most appropriate way for people to be treated safely and in a way that balances their human rights and care needs. This includes arranging for people to be detained in hospital when that is the most suitable outcome.

BIAs are responsible for undertaking an assessment of the care arrangements for a person who has been deprived of their liberty. For example, people being cared for in a secure care home or mental health unit. BIAs will do this when the person does not have the mental capacity to challenge a decision or to indicate their consent. BIAs ensure that depriving somebody of their liberty in this way is lawful, and properly balances the person's rights and freedoms with their need for care and safety.

As at August 2025, there were 15 course providers delivering 20 AMHP courses, and 16 course providers delivering 16 BIA courses. We have worked in collaboration with the sector to develop a tailored, streamlined approach to inspecting these specialist courses. This draws on our learning from our first cycle of inspections of qualifying education courses.

The graphics below provide an overview of the regional spread of AMHP and BIA courses across England. However, the nature of these shorter courses means that they often have a wide geographical reach, providing training for prospective AMHPs and BIAs across multiple regions.

We'll share more on our work in this area following the delivery of our first reapproval cycle of AMHP and BIA courses.



Figure 3. Regional breakdown of BIA courses as at August 2025

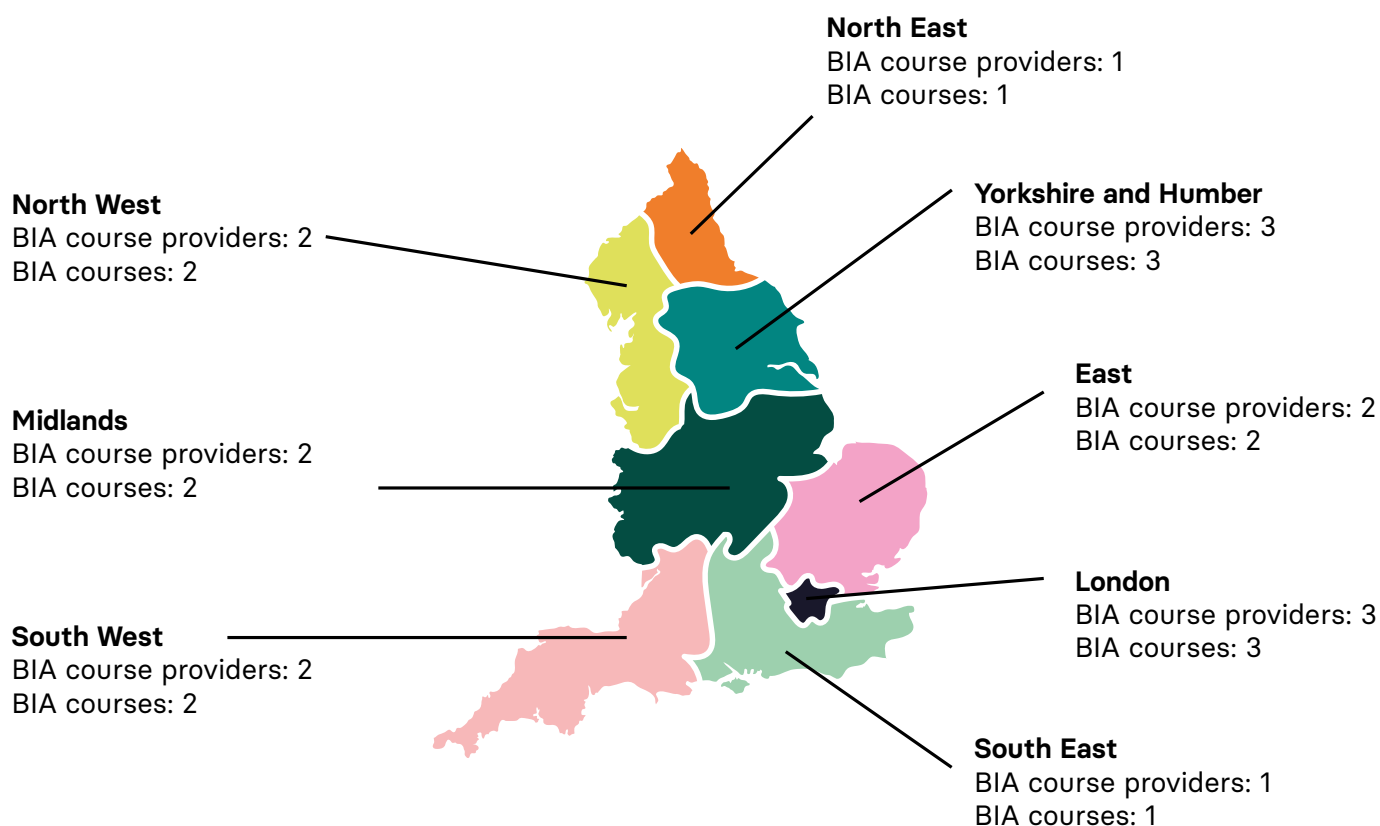
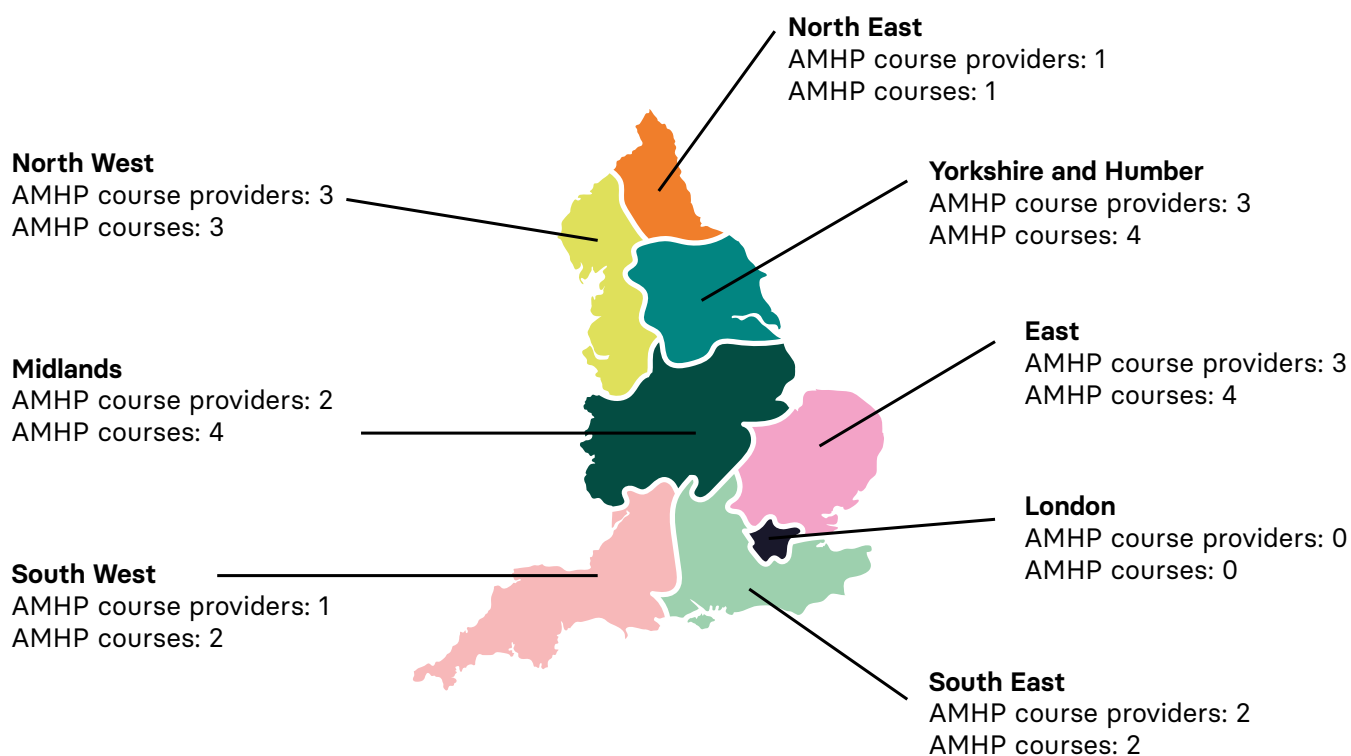


Figure 4. Regional breakdown of AMHP courses as at August 2025



Annual monitoring

Our regulations require that we must inspect all qualifying courses every 6 years. To ensure that they continue to meet our standards in the intervening years, we carry out an annual monitoring process. This enables us to continue to build a picture of the social work profession from initial education to post-qualifying. It supports our strategic ambition to raise the standards of social work education and training provision.

As part of this process, education providers are required to complete an annual monitoring return for each of the courses on our approved course list. As well as a declaration, we ask education providers about changes they have made to their courses, and the number of students they have on each of their courses by year of study. You can learn about our approach to annual monitoring from the [guidance](#) on our website.

As part of annual monitoring, education providers must declare that:

- the course meets our education and training standards
- those who successfully complete the course meet the professional standards required to join the Social Work England register

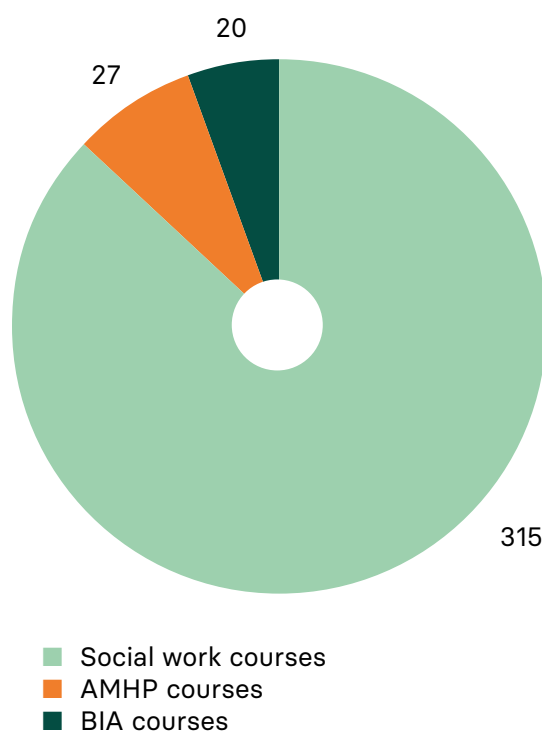
Insights from annual monitoring

This year our annual monitoring return requested information for academic year 2023 to 2024. We didn't include any new courses approved after 31 August 2024. This means that we received annual monitoring returns for 362 social work, AMHP and BIA courses.

While there were 355 qualifying social work courses on our approved list of courses (as at August 2025), only 315 of these courses were included in annual monitoring for academic year 2023 to 2024. This means that 40 new courses were approved after 31 August 2024. These courses will be included in the next annual monitoring cycle.

Likewise, we received annual monitoring returns for 7 AMHP courses which have closed since the previous academic year, and have since been removed from our approved list of courses, hence why there were 27 AMHP courses in this annual monitoring cycle, not 20.

Graph 6. Number of annual monitoring returns, by course, for academic year 2023 to 2024



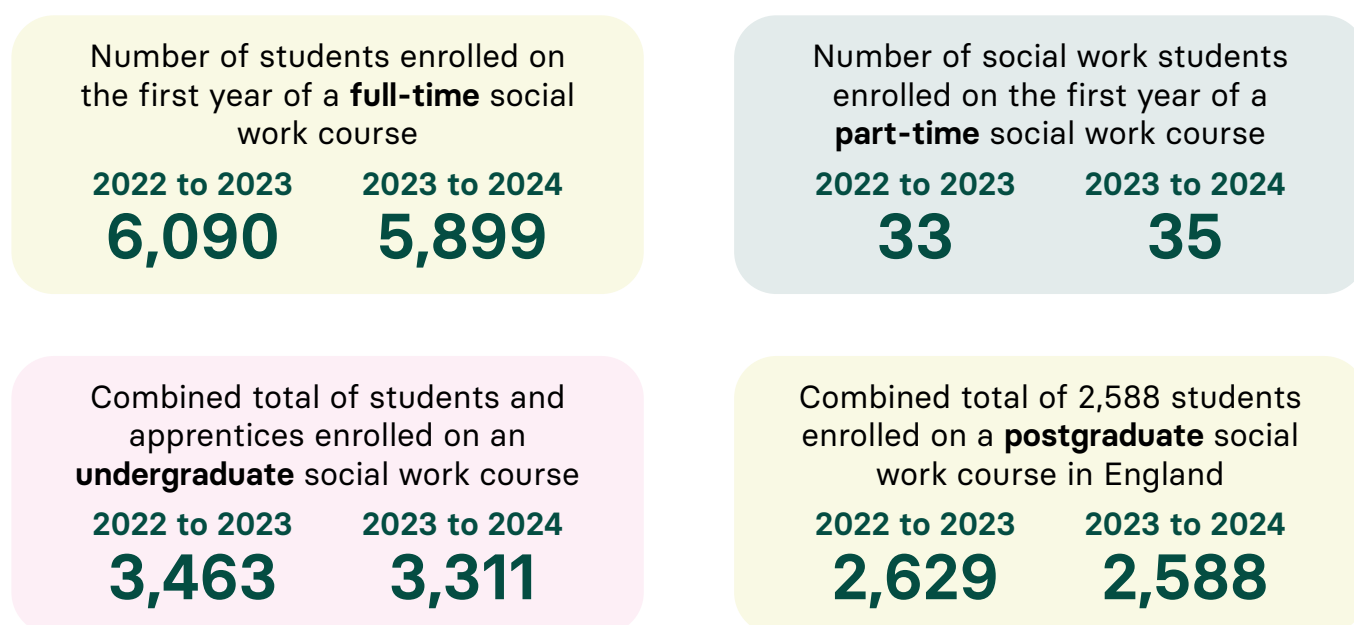
Enrolments

Social Work England does not register social work students or apprentices. This means that we cannot directly monitor the number of students or apprentices enrolling on social work courses each year. We ask course providers to share information in their annual monitoring return. However, this is not a requirement and is focused on the previous academic year (2023 to 2024).

We have started to explore annual monitoring as a way to understand trends in student and apprentice numbers across different routes into social work. The data provided below, and our reflections on them, are from the information provided by course providers as part of the annual monitoring return.

It is important to caveat that this will not include students or apprentices enrolled on the 40 courses approved after 31 August 2024. This is because we do not ask for annual monitoring returns from recently approved courses. This means that the actual number of students and apprentices enrolled on social work courses in England will be higher than what we are able to present below. However, we still feel that this is useful insight to share.

Figure 5. Enrolments on qualifying social work courses, by academic year



Our collection and analysis of this data is currently at an early stage. There are several factors which mean that this data may not wholly reflect an accurate picture of enrolments. For example, there are courses which run 2 cohorts of students per academic year, with course enrolment dates in both September and January. This can complicate the figures provided as part of annual monitoring returns. As we do not directly collect this data ourselves through the registration of students or apprentices, we are reliant on what course providers communicate to us. We have limited scope to verify the numbers provided.

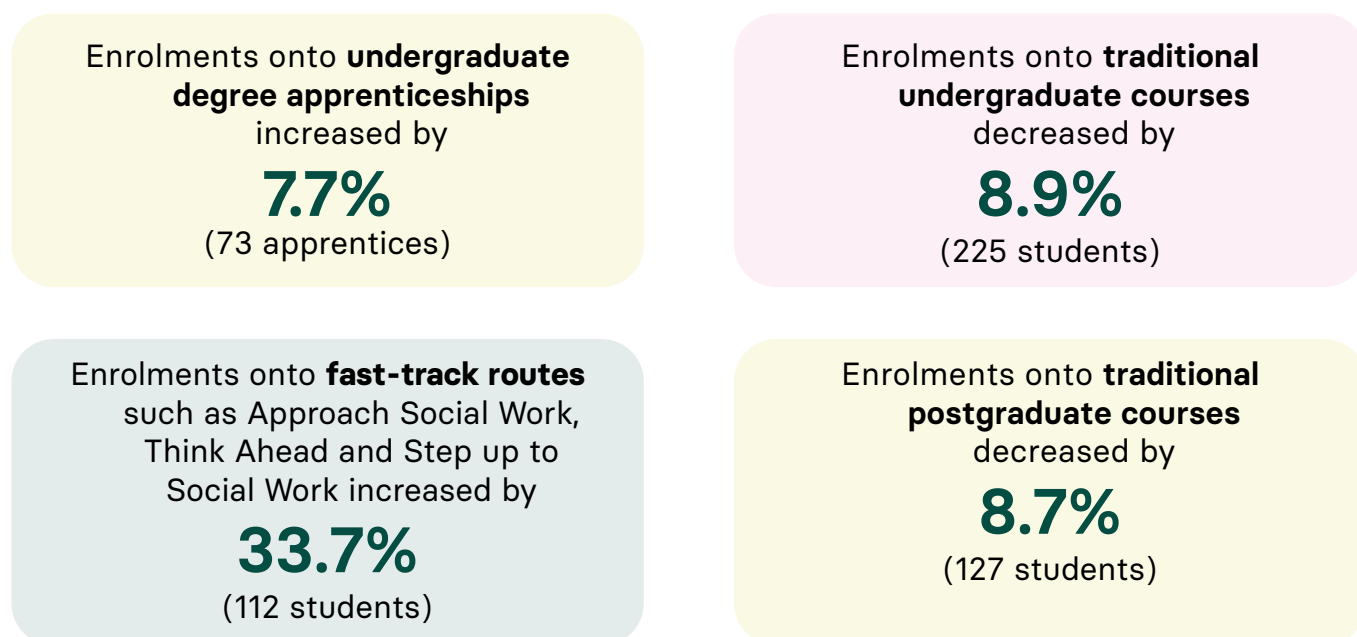
For academic year 2023 to 2024, the available data suggests there has been a small decrease in overall enrolments onto social work courses. This is in comparison to the information shared for academic year 2022 to 2023. Overall enrolments onto full time social work courses decreased by 3.14% between 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024. However, enrolments onto part time social work courses increased by 6.06%, albeit off a very small base.

Though we do expect that there are fluctuations between routes and modes of study, the data we collect through annual monitoring is not currently accurate enough to reliably identify trends in enrolments across England. This will be a key area of interest for us in the future as we look for ways to improve our understanding of trends in the student cohort and the nature of the student experience.

We look forward to the publication of analysis of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) by Skills for Care, which we understand is in progress following delays to the publication of HESA data. The last analysis of HESA data for social work courses in England was [published in April 2023](#), focusing on academic year 2021 to 2022.

Beyond overall increases or decreases, we can see differences in enrolments between routes.

Figure 6. Enrolments onto different routes in 2023 to 2024



This indicates an overall decrease in the number of enrolments across social work courses of 167. However, this will not account for enrolments onto courses which were not included in this year's annual monitoring process. It also confirms our broader observations around increased enrolments on apprenticeships and fast track routes, as people look to earn while they learn, or switch careers.

The growing proportion of our newly qualified workforce entering the profession via postgraduate fast track courses or postgraduate apprenticeships, also indicates that social work is an increasingly postgraduate profession. However, we are mindful of the potential decrease in enrolments onto traditional undergraduate and postgraduate courses, which we will continue to monitor closely. We are also aware of the future closure of

the Think Ahead fast-track course, as well as the overall reliance of fast-track routes on continued government funding.

Graduations

We have also started to explore whether we can use annual monitoring data to predict the number of students and apprentices likely to graduate from social work courses and apply to join our register. However, there are limitations to this information, as we can only understand from annual monitoring how many students or apprentices are enrolled in the final year of their course. The figures below are based on the assumption that these students and apprentices will successfully progress through their final year and graduate. As such, the figures are speculative at this stage.

Figure 7. Students and apprentices enrolled on the final year of a full-time social work course.

In 2022 to 2023 there were

6,006

students and apprentices enrolled on the final year of a **full-time** social work course in England.

In 2023 to 2024 there were

5,685

students and apprentices enrolled on the final year of a **full-time** social work course in England

In 2022 to 2023 there were

16

students and apprentices enrolled on the final year of a **part-time** social work course in England

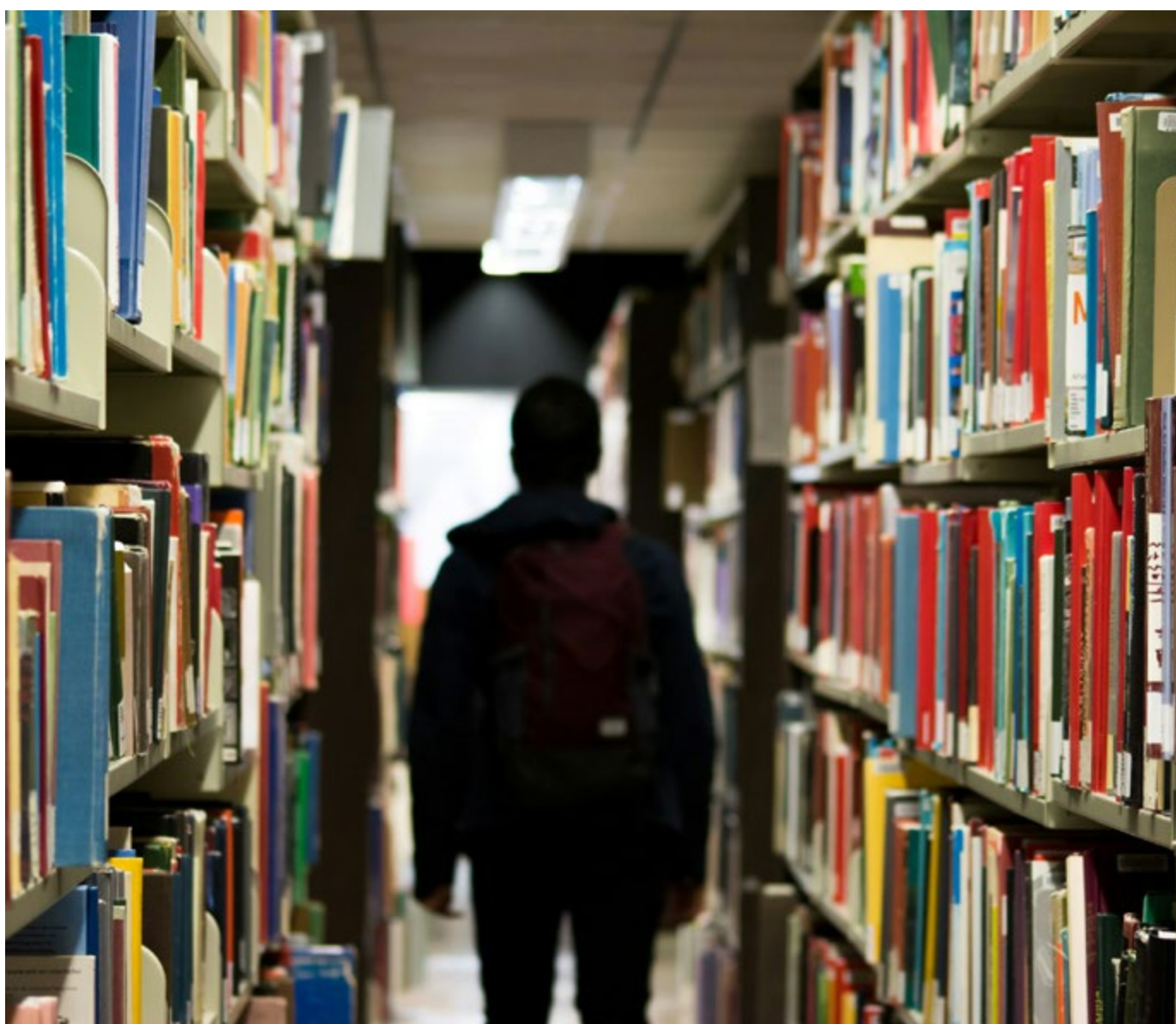
In 2023 to 2024 there were

17

students and apprentices enrolled on the final year of a **part-time** social work course in England

For academic year 2023 to 2024, the data suggests that overall, there has been a decrease (5.31%) in the number of students and apprentices enrolled on the final year of a social work course. This is a comparison to the information shared for academic year 2022 to 2023. We await publication of the analysis of HESA data by Skills for Care to provide a more accurate picture of how many students are qualifying from social work courses each year.

We are not currently able to compare this data to previous years, but will look to do so in the future. We are currently reviewing our annual monitoring process and requirements. We are keen to explore how we can expand the data we collect so that we can build a fuller and richer picture of the makeup of social work students in England.



Chapter 2: Reflections from regulating social work education



High quality social work education and training is essential to prepare students and apprentices for practice. It is also key to ensuring they can meet our professional standards when they enter the profession. Regulatory approval, and ongoing reapproval, of all courses in England assures the public that all social workers are receiving the best possible education and training in a supportive and inclusive environment. We do this by setting education and training standards for all social work courses in England.

In this chapter, we set out the history of regulating social work education, to show the journey and development of social work regulation over time. We then look at our current approach to regulation of courses. We set out the purpose of our standards and guidance and describe our approach to inspections.

Lastly, we share some of the results from our first reapproval cycle, including key themes and findings from the inspections. We expand on this more in Appendix A, reflecting on areas where inspections have driven improvement, and which standards were more likely to have conditions and recommendations set against them.



The history of regulating social work education

Regulation of social work is not a new concept. But what it looks like, and who delivers it, has changed a lot over the years. Figure 8 gives a high-level overview of that journey. This provides context for where we are now, including how we learn from past experiences and make informed decisions about the future of regulation.

Figure 8. The history of regulating social work education

1970

The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW)

becomes the statutory authority responsible for approving and assuring the quality of education and training for social work and social care staff across the UK.

2001

CCETSW is abolished and its functions taken over by the **General Social Care Council (GSCC)** in England. Social workers in England become regulated professionals and the government introduces the social work degree as the required qualification for practice.

2012

Following a review of arm's length bodies in 2010, the Government abolishes the GSCC and transfers most of its regulatory functions, including approving and monitoring social work courses, to the **Health Care Professions Council (HCPC)**.

The College of Social Work ('the College'), is founded with a mission to improve standards in social work, and runs a non-mandatory endorsement scheme for social work courses in England.

2014

2 independent reviews on social work education and training are published: **David Croisdale-Appleby's** 'Re-visioning social work education' and **Sir Martin Narey's** 'Making the education of social workers consistently effective'. Both find regulation needs to be strengthened and duplication between the HCPC and the College needs to be reduced. They find that regulatory standards and processes need to improve to enable rigorous scrutiny of the quality of social work education. Both make recommendations about how social work education should be funded, structured, delivered and assessed.

2015

The College of Social Work closes after facing financial challenges and struggling to attract enough support to become sustainable. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) takes ownership of several of the College's resources, including the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and a continuing professional development (CPD) endorsement framework.



2016

The government announces its intention to set up a new specialist regulatory body for social workers in England, charged with raising the status of the profession and driving up standards in social work education, training and practice.

2018

Work starts to set up the new specialist regulator, Social Work England.

2019

The HCPC transfers responsibility for regulating social workers and social work education to Social Work England.

That brings us to 2025 and to our role as the regulator of social workers and social work courses. It's been a changing landscape, both from a societal, sector and regulatory perspective. So, while we have high ambitions for social work education, we also want to bring consistency and stability. The primary way we do this is through the setting, monitoring and maintaining of education and training standards.

Our approach to regulation of courses

Our standards and guidance

We developed our education and training standards in collaboration with education providers, social workers, employers and people with lived experience of social work.

Our standards are supported by guidance. It is through our guidance that we're able to provide further depth and context on the standards. In the guidance, we set out what we expect to see from education providers to evidence that their courses are meeting the standards.

At the time of writing, it is our intention to review our standards for qualifying social work courses. The review of these standards, following our first reapproval cycle of all social work courses in England, presents us with the opportunity to make amendments based on the learning we have gathered and the feedback from the sector.

We're also developing new guidance on 'readiness for professional practice'. This will make explicit the specific [knowledge, skills and behaviours](#) (KSBs) that are required of courses to ready students to meet the professional standards.

Learning through lived experience


People with lived experience of social work play a vital role in informing and co-producing our approach to the regulation of social work education. We work with people with lived and learned experience through our National Advisory Forum (NAF), our ETAF and our PEDG.

We always meet with people with lived experience of social work as part of our course inspections and have invited those

who are involved in social work courses to directly shape potential revisions to our education standards and guidance as part of our upcoming proposed review. We consulted people with lived experience during the creation of our KSBs and we have engaged this group in the development of our proposed readiness for professional practice guidance.

We recognise that people with lived experience of social work can provide unique insight and demonstrate the value of social work by sharing their personal experiences. This can empower students and help them understand the role they can play in people's lives through best practice. With this in mind, when we introduced our education and training standards in 2021, we strengthened the involvement of people with lived experience of social work in the design and delivery of courses.

"Their experiences and insights have shown me the importance of active listening, empathy, and advocacy. This experience also strengthened my commitment to empowering clients in my future practice. Each time I listen to my clients' stories and perspectives, I gain invaluable insights into the complexities and realities of social work practice."
Social work student



“I found that listening to people with lived experience provided the most valuable learning opportunities during the course, particularly while in placement. These opportunities highlighted the importance of adapting my communication style and showing empathy. Building meaningful relationships made my experience as a social work student incredibly rewarding and purposeful; learning about other people’s lived experiences broadened my perspective”

Newly qualified social worker

“We had many people come and share their stories from adoptive dads to people with learning disabilities. I learnt that no matter how small of a difference you think you are making to someone’s life, to them it could mean the biggest impact”

Newly qualified social worker

The guidance which underpins our education and training standards highlights the principle of co-production. This recognises that people should be seen as equal partners in the design, delivery and review of social work education. Co-production is vital in ensuring that a course is current, relevant and provides social workers with the skills and knowledge to be able to support others. The involvement of people with lived experience can be seen across the whole student journey. Their involvement can include:

- helping education providers decide which applicants are suitable to study social work
- supporting preparation for practice
- shaping assessments
- engaging in teaching and learning
- sharing their expertise to improve course curriculums over time



Sally Parker, expert by experience and member of the ETAF:

"The knowledge, skills and behaviours project involved people with lived experience of social work to a whole new level. The ETAF includes academics, tutors, social workers, practice educators and managers. Everyone has parked their labels at the door and has a safe space to say what social work education means to them.

"There were 2 experts by experience from education providers on the ETAF, and we wanted to include more voices. We set up focus groups specifically for experts by experience involved in training social workers. I'm proud to say that the 2 sessions happened as a result of our input. Whilst they were modelled on the other sessions, they were facilitated by people with lived experience. I think this was really important for getting the focus right. They brought a real life aspect to how the new guidance should be written and implemented and have given us a foundation for doing more of this work in the future.

"True co-production depends on creating the right tone, environment and culture for everybody to feel comfortable about getting involved. This is a good example of Social Work England bringing about change in the right way. It's a true partnership to create authentic guidance, which will genuinely benefit social work students, higher education providers and most importantly those of us who have social workers in our lives."

Our relationship based approach

We have developed a relationship based approach to our quality assurance of education and training. Much of the impact of our inspection activity rests on the dialogue and discussion with education providers.

Our education quality assurance officers work closely with education providers. They are supported by our regional engagement leads, who are all experienced social workers. Good working relationships and open communication encourages honesty and transparency between us as a regulator, and the people who lead the courses that we regulate.

We want education providers to feel confident in approaching us for advice on how to meet our standards. We also want to collaboratively explore aspects of their course design and delivery, as well as how our regulation shapes and impacts social work courses.

"Where relationships with course providers are strong, the response to conditions is more positive and constructive. I hope that education providers found the team helpful and approachable"
Education quality assurance officer

“Working collaboratively is key to the inspection process. I feel that the relationship based approach fits with the values of social work and those of the social work profession”
Education quality assurance officer

“The aim is to help course providers make their course better – I’m always willing to have constructive discussions with course providers. It’s important to be supportive.”
Education quality assurance officer

We have built relationships with networks and organisations with an interest in social work education and training, including teaching partnerships and the:

- Education and Training Advisory Forum (ETAF)
- Practice Education Development Group (PEDG)
- Apprenticeship Trailblazer Group for Social Work
- National Organisation of Practice Teaching (NOPT)
- Joint Universities Social Work Association (JUSWA)
- Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW)
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
- Office for Students (OfS)

This helps us to keep up to date with what is happening on the ground for social work academics, employers and practice educators. It also, provides regular opportunities for collaboration and sharing information.

We have built a close relationship with the Apprenticeship Trailblazer Group for Social Work, enabling us to work collaboratively on a number of changes to the apprenticeship, including:

- revising the end point assessment based on feedback from education providers, apprentices and employers
- supporting the introduction of a postgraduate option for apprentices
- considering how Social Work England’s knowledge, skills and behaviours can be embedded in the apprenticeship standard, to reduce duplication and streamline requirements between regulators

The reapproval cycle

One of the most ambitious pieces of work we have undertaken as a regulator is the reapproval of all qualifying social work courses in England. We are required to re-approve courses every 6 years. However, we chose to complete our first reapproval cycle in 3 and a half years. This shorter period allowed us an early opportunity to consider any learning from the delivery of the cycle, and set our ambitions for next one. It has involved a huge amount of effort not only from our education quality assurance colleagues and inspector partners, but also from every social work education provider in England.

As at March 2025 we had concluded 257 inspections of social work courses as part of our reapproval cycle. Of the 257 inspections:

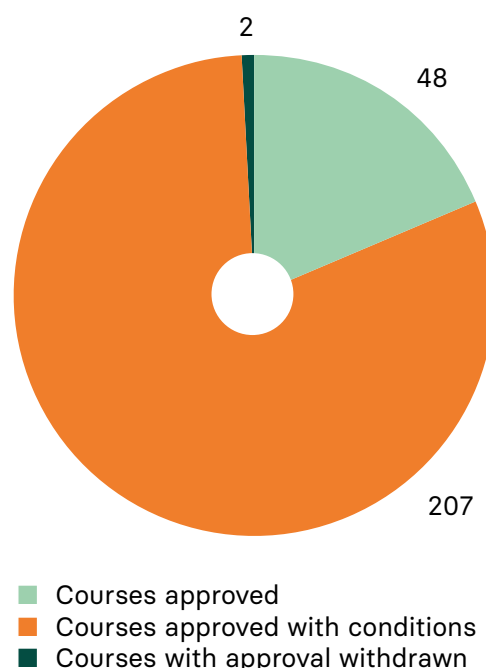
- 48 courses were approved
- 207 courses were approved with conditions
- 2 courses had their approval withdrawn

Of the 2 courses that had their approval withdrawn, one course was initially approved with conditions. The other course had their approval withdrawn without conditions being set.



By the end of the reapproval cycle **255** courses were approved
2 had their approval withdrawn

Graph 7. Inspection outcomes as at March 2025



Of the 207 courses approved with conditions, all were able to provide satisfactory evidence following their inspection outcome that the conditions were met.

Withdrawal of approval

When we propose withdrawal of approval, we notify the course provider in writing. We also give them the opportunity to make any final observations before a regulatory decision is made. We make a final decision after considering any observations. During this period, we set up regular meetings with the course provider to progress next steps. While not compulsory we encourage joint stakeholder meetings with the OfS and the Office for the Independent Adjudicator. These meetings help us to understand the intricacies of appropriately timed communication with the different parties involved. For example, applicants, students, apprentices, course staff and local employers.

We work to support anyone who may be impacted by the course closure where possible, within the remit of our legislation. This can involve liaising with other local social work course providers, who may be able to accept students or apprentices onto their programmes so that they can continue their studies. Ensuring that any disruption to students and apprentices is managed, and minimal, will always be at the forefront of any arrangements made to transfer cohorts to other programmes. We will agree a date for withdrawal with the course provider, and strive to mitigate the impact on stakeholders where possible. In both cases where course approvals were withdrawn during this first cycle of inspections, students were successfully transferred over to different courses so they could continue and complete their students.

Supporting education providers

We recognise that people may feel anxious about an inspection. We have regular contact and conversations with course teams in the lead-up, helping people to understand the inspection process and the decisions that we can make.

We plan inspections closely with education providers and work together to shape the agendas. We provide feedback on any evidence we receive from education providers before an inspection takes place. This gives course staff the opportunity to provide additional evidence ahead of their inspection.

What we have learned from our reapproval inspections

From an analysis of our reapproval inspection data, we can understand where conditions were most likely to be applied against specific education and training standards.

We have reviewed the conditions set to better understand why conditions were more likely to be set against certain standards, and what this can tell us about social work education. We have also explored where recommendations were more likely to be made against some standards over others. We have provided an overview of what we found here. The full findings from our analysis can be read in Appendix A.

A recommendation is made when a standard is met, but the inspection team wants to offer further advice or feedback which may improve the delivery of the course. Education providers do not have to provide any further evidence or response if a recommendation is set.

A condition for approval is set if there are areas of a course that do not currently meet our standards. The education provider must meet the conditions within the agreed timescales.

Key themes and findings

This was the first time many social work courses had been inspected against our new education and training standards. We therefore expected that we would approve many providers with conditions. A condition may indicate minor issues such as gaps in paperwork, or more substantive issues such as processes that are working ineffectively or are absent. It is not unusual for a course to be ultimately approved even if many conditions are set. This is as long as the course provider takes the appropriate steps to adjust or make improvements to their provision.

Given this was our first reapproval cycle, we do not have enough data to determine whether courses of a particular route (for example fast track routes, or apprenticeships) are more or less likely to meet our standards than other routes. This is because we may apply conditions to a course for a wide variety of reasons, regardless of how it is structured or funded. As we conduct more inspections in the future, we may be able to compare inspection data by route in ways which could indicate wider trends.

A total of 664 conditions were applied across 257 inspections. One course had its approval withdrawn without conditions being set. Our education standards address aspects of course provision including:

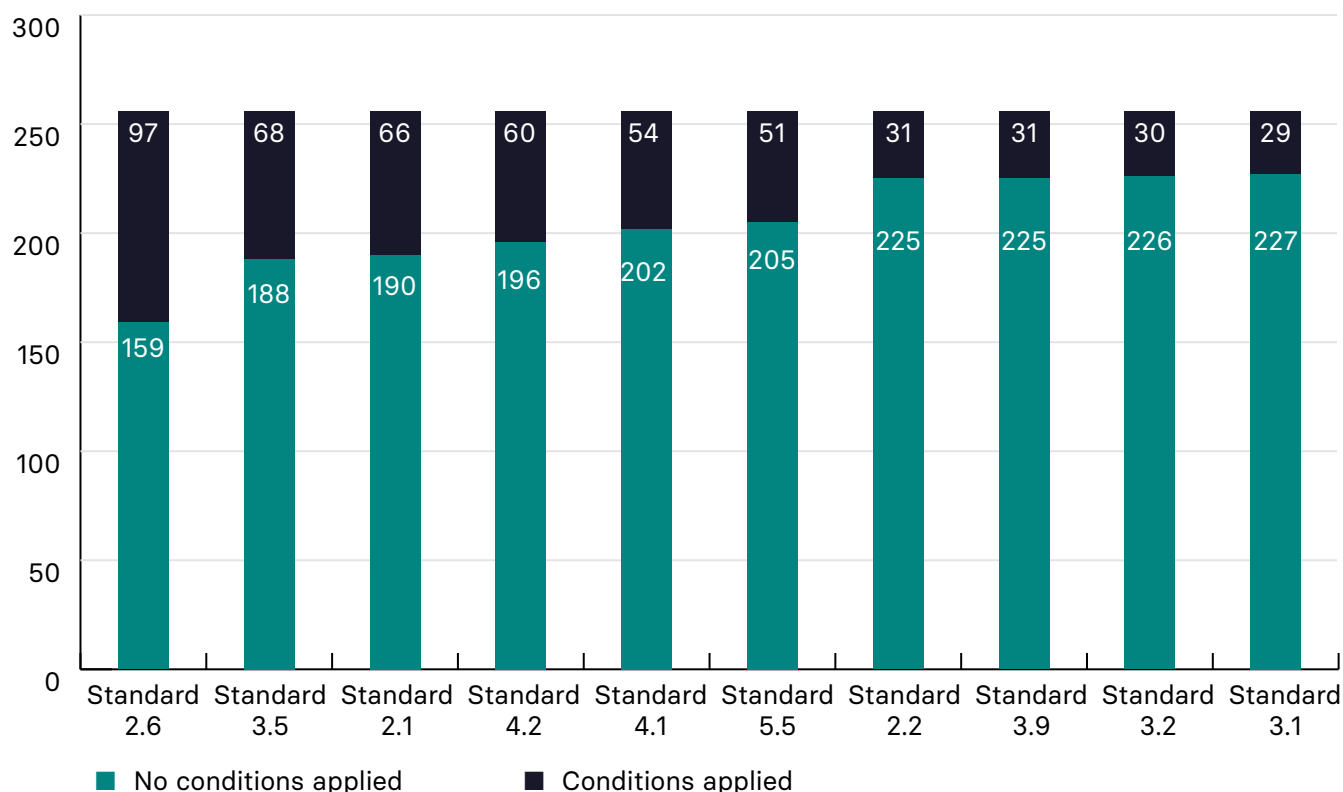
- admissions
- the learning environment (with a focus on practice based learning)
- course governance, management and quality
- curriculum and assessment
- supporting students
- level of qualification to apply for entry onto the register

Conditions were applied against most areas of our standards, but some standards attracted more conditions than others.



664 conditions were applied across **257** inspections

Graph 8. Standards most likely to have conditions set against them



We have provided a detailed analysis of the standards most likely to have conditions set against them in Appendix A. This includes our reflections on the potential reasons for this. We recommend reading this analysis to further understand the drivers behind conditions. It also offers insight into the improvements made in areas such as engagement with practice educators, enhancement of skills days, and involvement of key stakeholders in the design and delivery of social work courses.

Through our analysis, we found 6 key themes in the conditions set. We explore these themes in more detail below. In some cases, the reasons for a condition to be applied were highly unique and localised to an individual course. We have therefore focused on examples where conditions were applied repeatedly to different courses, but with the same core focus.

Figure 9. Headline findings from reapproval inspection analysis

Process development and implementation

Improving the monitoring of course attendance, systems for ongoing course monitoring and evaluation, or how course teams would collect and monitor data in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion (228 (34%) of all conditions applied).

Administrative matters

Updating course documentation for accuracy and currency, or providing clearer information on specific topics for applicants, students and apprentices (178 (27%) of all conditions applied).

Provision of learning opportunities

The organisation, delivery and quality assurance of practice based learning (80, (12%) of all conditions applied).

Effective strategic engagement of partners

Involvement of employers, students and people with lived experience of social work in course design and delivery (127 (19%) of all conditions applied).

Sufficient resourcing

Ensuring that courses have adequate staffing and support (including from practice educators), and placement capacity (29 (4%) of all conditions applied).

Ongoing training

Ensuring sufficient training and development opportunities for course staff, and people supporting course delivery such as practice educators and people with lived experience of social work (22 (3%) of all conditions applied).

[note 4: 1% of conditions were outside these categories, but didn't constitute a significant theme.]

Administrative matters

We applied 88 conditions (13.2% of all 664 conditions set) requiring improvements to course documentation. These usually highlighted minor changes that education providers needed to make to ensure that information on their websites, virtual learning environments and in student handbooks was up to date. In many cases this could be as simple as updating a single webpage.

There were 89 conditions applied (13.8%) which referenced providing information to students. This often involved the additional step of ensuring that information on key policies and processes was clear, accessible and signposted to students throughout their time on the course. For example, this could relate to information about reasonable adjustments, or the academic regulations for course assessments.

Within 12 of the conditions applied (1.8%), we asked education providers to provide evidence relating to the appointment of suitable (registered) external examiners for the course. This is because, in some cases this wasn't available at the point of inspection.

Provision of learning opportunities

We applied 27 conditions (4.1%) which specifically requested further evidence in relation to placement capacity. Often in relation to placement capacity, inspection teams were seeking clarity that course recruitment was linked to regional demand for newly qualified social workers and supply of suitable placements by employers. Inspection teams felt that this could sometimes be improved if the course provider could develop stronger working relationships with key local and regional partners.

There were 15 conditions applied (2.3%) which were more broadly concerned with the delivery of practice based learning such as ensuring that the requirement for 200 days of practice based learning, including learning in contrasting settings, was clearly evidenced by the course provider.

Process development and implementation

Inspection teams seek evidence to demonstrate that the course team understands and consistently implements processes or policies.

Attendance was discussed within 39 conditions we applied (5.8%), normally in relation to attendance monitoring processes and whether these were felt to be effective. Social work education providers need to make it clear to students and apprentices which parts of the course are mandatory, and what will happen if they are absent during mandatory parts of the course.

Another common theme in this area was practice education. In particular, the need for education providers to ensure, each year, that practice educators remain registered with Social Work England. 60 conditions we applied (9%) were linked to this theme.



Strategic engagement of partners

All social work courses involve people with lived experience. In most cases conditions were seeking to ensure that this involvement was effective, sustainable and evidenced across a range of areas beyond teaching and learning.

We applied 49 conditions (7.4%) referencing the need to better involve people with lived experience of social work in aspects of course delivery, such as admissions processes, course design, assessment and course evaluation.

There were 56 conditions applied (8.4%) which addressed the involvement of employer representatives and partners, often in areas such as admissions and course evaluation. Inspection teams needed to be assured that employers were sufficiently involved in conversations linked to placement capacity, and of the availability of suitably qualified practice educators in the local area.

A further 56 (8.4%) conditions were applied in relation to course evaluation. Inspection teams identified that course teams should take steps to ensure that external stakeholders were included in annual reviews, and offered regular opportunities to feedback on what was working well, or what could be improved.

Ongoing training

We applied 56 conditions (8.4%) which referenced equality, diversity and inclusion. In most cases these highlighted the need for course staff and stakeholders to participate in training on inclusive practice, particularly in relation to activities such as course admission and assessment. For example, it is not uncommon for education providers to involve social work practitioners and people with lived experience of social work in admissions interviews. Inspection teams were sometimes concerned that training was not offered to volunteers before interviews. For example, discussing how to mitigate bias in decision making, how to score fairly, and the different kinds of reasonable adjustments which may be offered to applicants.

Sufficient resourcing

There were 29 (4%) conditions applied which focused on aspects of course resourcing. This could indicate vacancies within the course team, or recent changes in academic staffing. It could also show issues in relation to sufficiency of practice educators, or practice learning opportunities in the local area. Inspection teams may also pick up on aspects of course sustainability. For example, contingency planning for staff absences which could disrupt the delivery of key areas of the programme.

Chapter 3: Experiences of our reapproval inspections

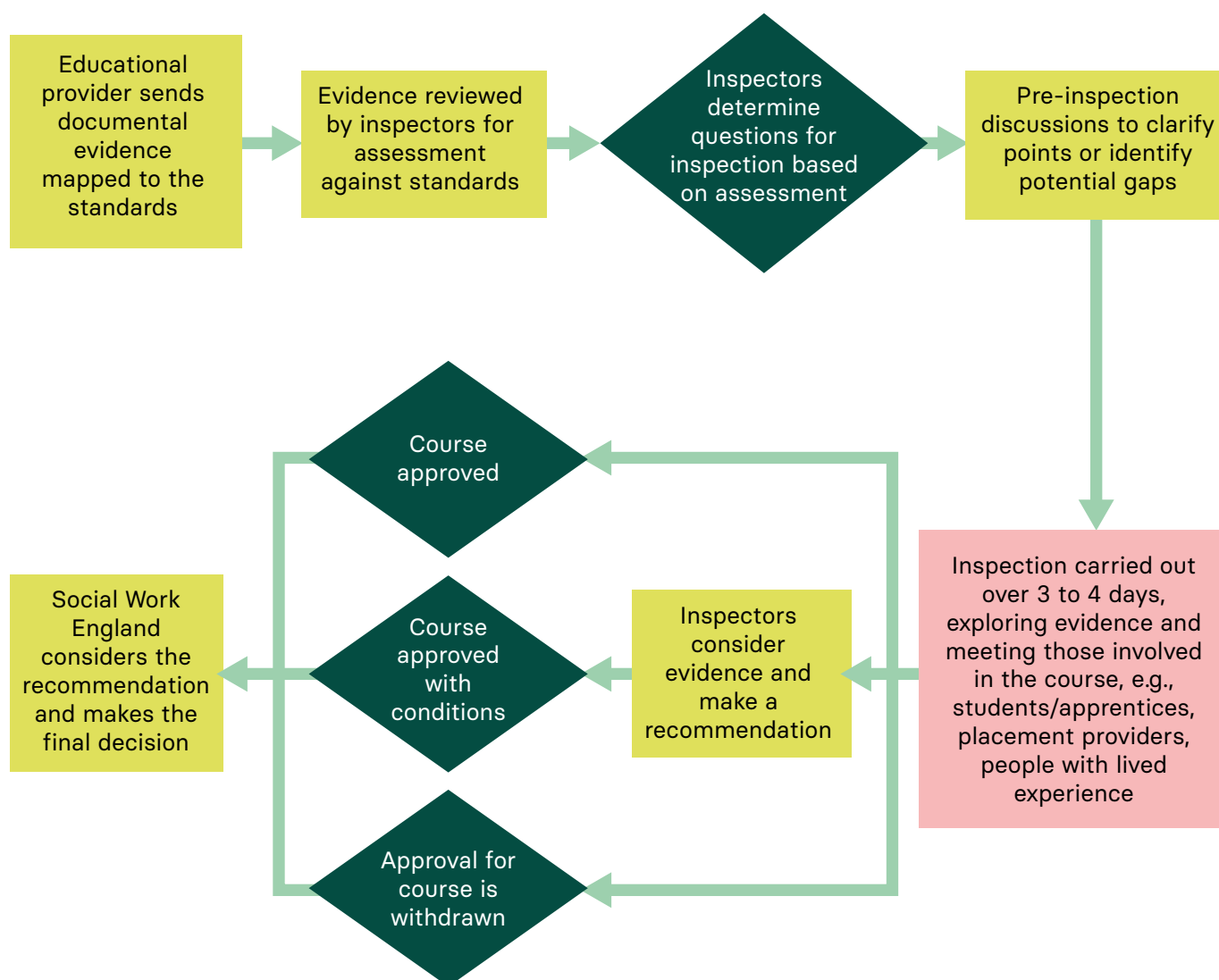


In this chapter we explore our approach to engaging with education providers, and how this supports our regulation and inspection activity. We share reflections on experiences of our inspection process, drawing from interviews with social work academics and our education quality assurance (EQA) inspector partners.

Our approach to inspections

Inspections are a key mechanism for ensuring that social work courses meet our education and training standards. They allow us to evaluate course quality, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that students and apprentices receive an education that prepares them for practice. Further information about our inspection process and the decisions that we can make is available on our [website](#).

Figure 10. Overview of our inspection process



Our inspection teams usually involve a minimum of 2 independent education quality assurance inspectors.

Lay inspectors come from a wide variety of backgrounds and help to represent the views of the public. They can be people with lived experience of social work, allied health professionals, nurses, teachers, legal professionals, academics, or people with a regulatory background.

Registrant inspectors come from across a broad range of social work backgrounds. This has included practice educators, mental health social workers, social work academics, social workers from the voluntary and private sector, as well as adults and children's social workers.

Experiences of our inspection process

To understand the experiences of people involved in our inspection process we spoke with:

- social work academics and course leaders
- practice education leads
- those working in broader national roles linked to social work education
- our education quality assurance inspectors.

These conversations provide a snapshot of experiences of people involved in our reapproval cycle.

"I think your stress levels spike at the point that you know that this is coming. You look at your diaries and you look at when it's going to happen and what you've got to do to get to a state of readiness"

Social work academic

"There was obviously something about us as an institution not knowing what to expect. It was very loaded that first inspection, it just literally felt it's one of the most anxiety provoking things I've ever done at the university. I do think we've got better at it. So, when I look back now, we're much more familiar and it doesn't seem to be as arduous"

Social work academic

"There was a lot of repetition and we were preparing 2 sets of paperwork, but we met with an education quality officer, who I have to say was absolutely brilliant, really, really helpful."

Social work academic

“I think the volume of paperwork that’s needed is huge. I think secondly, it’s actually really important to have that because you’re triangulating evidence.

We can say we do X, but you need to see a policy that confirms this is what we do. So I think it’s really important to have all those sources of evidence”

Social work lecturer

“Obviously, the universities have put a lot of work into it. I have worked at a university, and I’ve been part of the team that has inspected. So, I’ve had both sides of it and it’s a momentous amount of work both for the university and also for us as the inspection team”

Education quality assurance inspector

Preparing for an inspection

Before an inspection takes place, both we and the education provider must prepare. This includes gathering evidence, planning agendas and deciding whether to hold the event onsite or remotely.

The most common feedback from education providers about their experience of preparing for an inspection was around the time and effort required to provide evidence mapped against our education and training standards. They often experienced this as a stressful part of the process.

While much of this evidence already existed, several academics talked about issues in accessing the university systems where it was stored. Often in an online format that was difficult to share. There were also issues, especially for education providers new to the inspection process, in matching the evidence to the standards. This could lead to the creation of large portfolios of evidence and, “the administration of countless appendices” (lecturer). But most academics understood how the inspection would benefit from real evidence of what the programme was doing.

Previous experience of an inspection made subsequent visits (for reapproval or approval of another programme) much easier. This suggests a steep but beneficial learning curve. This experience was mirrored by several respondents.

We appreciate that preparing for an inspection, especially the first inspection, can feel daunting. We supported education providers directly by providing a named member of Social Work England staff throughout each stage of the inspection process. Some respondents felt this worked well.

The inspection event

When we became the regulator for social work, we expected all our inspections to be delivered onsite and in person. However, we found some benefits to running inspections online as well. So, following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, though we began to return to in person inspections, we also continued to use online or hybrid inspection models where appropriate.

By offering some online inspection events, we have been able to successfully manage inspections with multiple course approvals. This has also enabled us to inspect courses that may have otherwise been cancelled due to extenuating circumstances. For example, where strikes have impacted public transport. Having this option available has ensured that we have continued to meet with a full range of stakeholders as part of the inspection process.

In our conversations, most respondents believed that in person was better overall, but online was satisfactory. Several academics in university settings mentioned the strain of diary management with a wide group of staff, with competing demands, for an in-person inspection.

“I will be hard pressed to say which is my favourite. I like going to the sites because I think you get a stronger feel for the team and how the team are working and it’s sometimes interesting to watch the dynamics within a team when you’re in the same room. However, having said that, I think virtual doesn’t take anything away from it...”

Education quality assurance inspector

“It’s a heavy resource demand on our staff team. We were literally having to juggle our staff because you know, we are still in lectures and doing all those.”

Social work academic

“And I have to say it was a really positive experience, the inspectors were really compassionate. They were approachable. They were challenging. But they challenged in a respectful way. They were thorough”

Social work academic

“We didn’t feel as if there was any reason for anxiety. They were really good with the service users and the experts by experience and the practitioners...”

Social work academic

“There’s morning meetings and at the end of the day meetings [with education quality assurance officers], I think these were good. They were almost like a bridge in and out of the inspection and they did help us shape what we needed to do more of.”

Social work academic

“The student meetings I find a challenge because I don’t think they give enough time to the student meetings because I know we’ve called students back a couple of times”

Education quality assurance inspector

Respondents generally found the inspection experience to be positive. This was, despite initial nerves and the pressure on course teams while preparing for the event. Most academics felt that in the end, the inspection went smoothly. They also felt that inspection teams could be trusted to engage professionally and constructively with students, employer partners, and the people with lived experience of social work involved in their courses.

They also commented positively on the role of the Education Quality Officer. This was with regards to both their role in helping set the tone, but also in guiding the programme through the inspection event.

While this feedback presents a broadly positive picture, there were also areas in which respondents were critical. For example, one respondent talked about the tendency for inspections to have large meetings, involving many people, with busy competing diaries. They felt that this increased anxiety, and suggested a focus on a smaller number of people would be better. Another respondent shared their experiences of some of the stakeholder meetings.

After the inspection

Following the conclusion of the inspection, the inspection team discuss and agree on comments, conditions and recommendations. Following the decision outcome, we make the report is publicly available [on our website](#).

Inspectors who we spoke with highlighted that they felt inspections were positive for courses in the long-term. They helped to identify areas for improvement and provided opportunities for course teams to reflect on what they do well, or might want to focus on in the future. Similarly, course providers felt that the inspection process moved the programme forward in some ways. They also felt it identified areas that needed attention.

We are aware of the challenges facing the higher education sector in the current climate. Respondents appreciated this sensitivity. When reflecting on the inspection process as a whole, almost all respondents felt it worked well.

"It enhances the quality of the programmes. I really do genuinely think that by the time they come out and they've addressed the conditions that they've been given, then they are much better programmes than the ones that were put, you know, given to us to start with"
Education quality assurance inspector

"I think every condition or recommendation that we've had, it's been logical ... and we've almost been able to predict what the conditions will be as we've gone through. So you know we've been working on gaps and things that we need to address."

Social work academic



“Being in a higher education institute (HEI) at the moment is a really difficult place to be, and we’re getting a lot of negative messages. So, to actually have something really positive that says, I like to say validates what we’re doing and why we’re doing it the way that we’re doing it. It was really helpful”
Social work academic

“We had some really good experiences with Social Work England as well, some of the inspectors were just brilliant and they were really compassionate and they were really curious and the level of challenge was quite deep sometimes. And those types of inspections really make you think about what you do and why you’re doing it and how”
Social work academic

There were constructive suggestions about how we might develop the inspection process. For example to:

- produce a more user friendly summary version of detailed reports
- lengthen the timeframe of inspections
- address the complexity of the education and training standards which, one inspector felt, were not as clear and explicit as the professional standards.

The most consistent theme was that while the process is performing well as a means of ensuring courses meet the standards, respondents questioned how it could go further to explore the quality of social work education.

We welcome all feedback from those involved in our quality assurance education process. It’s important for us as a regulator to review our approach. We are committed to ensuring that the processes through which we regulate social work education and training continue to provide valuable insight and drive improvements in quality.



Chapter 4: Innovation, inclusivity and student experiences



Social work education, much like social work practice, is shaped by society. Changes in public policy, legislation, the economy, our communities, and technology, all converge to impact social work. This influences practice, causing it to evolve and grow. In the earlier chapters, we described the shape of social work education in England, reflected on our regulation of social work education, and shared our and other's experiences of reapproval inspections.

We want to consider what this means for the future of social work education and training. In this chapter we share some of our observations of social work education today, exploring how it's evolving, and how changes in technology are shaping new ways of teaching and learning in social work. We highlight some of the ongoing issues around equality, diversity and inclusion, and celebrate what's being done to address them. We then reflect on some of the broader challenges facing social work education, and the potential implications for education providers, employers and people studying social work.

Progress and innovation in social work education

Social work education is rich in examples of innovation, experimentation and imaginative approaches to course delivery. Driven initially by the need to adapt courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most social work programmes now successfully embrace hybrid models of teaching and learning. This can enable more flexible approaches to providing support to students. For example, offering remote pastoral meetings or academic tutorials while students are off campus on placement.

Changes in technology are enabling further innovative approaches to teaching and learning in social work education. We have observed increasingly creative uses of 'simulated learning' within social work courses. This can help students and apprentices to practice their skills safely before working directly with the public. While many education providers have used physical spaces to help simulate environments, such as mock court rooms and living spaces, new technologies such as virtual reality and digital training simulations are enhancing what is possible.

Multidisciplinary learning at the University of Bedfordshire

The University of Bedfordshire has a state of the-art 'SIM Street', an immersive set of facilities designed to enhance the training of students across different programmes. It offers realistic learning spaces which gives students an insight into their future careers. It includes a hospital ward, operating theatre, police custody suite, nursing home bedroom and community based clinic spaces. There is also a street layout featuring simulated flats fully equipped with furniture. Finally, there is an immersive room, where walls transform to simulate diverse environments, where students can practice in a 'real life' setting.

Social work students and apprentices often get the chance to engage in real life role plays or activities. They do this with people with lived experience of social work, who have volunteered to take part in teaching or assessment. However, there can be limitations to these experiences. There are ethical and safeguarding implications associated with the involvement of children, or people with significant mental health issues. Here, simulated and virtual learning can bring the voices of these people into the classroom, without risk of distress or harm.

Simulation based training at the University of Kent

The [Centre for Child Protection](#) at the University of Kent creates immersive, research informed simulations that mirror the real world complexity of safeguarding work. These simulations can be used to enhance teaching for social work students. They can also provide training and continuing professional development opportunities for social workers in practice. Using gaming technology to create 'serious games', their simulations allow people to explore emotionally challenging work safely. In doing so, students and practitioners can reflect on practice, explore decision making and build confidence. Current simulations address scenarios such as online grooming and sexual exploitation of young people, child abuse, family court processes, criminal exploitation, and radicalisation.

The use of virtual and digital simulations can offer great opportunities for social work learning. Still, courses must balance this with direct, face to face contact with people with lived experience. Use of these technologies builds on years of innovation by educators. Many have used videos, voice recordings, theatre, music, poetry, photographs and artwork involving people with lived experience to bring social work learning to life.

Virtual reality simulation at Manchester Metropolitan University

The CAVE is an interactive room that can replicate any physical environment virtually. Using 360 degree sight and sound, the CAVE can support learning by simulating everyday environments students might encounter in their future career.

Scenario based learning can include working with someone at risk of displacement due to climate-related issues (such as flooding) and interacting with people with lived experience in a variety of environments. For example, in home, schools, hospitals and courts. Students can also use virtual reality equipment and headsets to create an immersive learning experience.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social work education and practice is another area which may drive innovation. Social work students and apprentices are increasingly exposed to AI enhanced digital technologies. These may make routine tasks such as note taking, transcription, record searching, proofreading, generating ideas or templates, and undertaking preliminary research more efficient.

Most education providers are at an early stage of exploring how teaching on the use of AI in social work should be incorporated into course curriculums. We have seen examples of teaching on the ethical implications of using AI in social work, exploring issues such as informed consent, bias and the importance of critical thinking.

It is possible to use AI appropriately and ethically, in line with our professional standards. We are keen to encourage social work education providers to explore the opportunities, risks and challenges of new technologies with students and apprentices. We'll continue to work with course providers as these new areas of social work education develop and evolve in the future.

Celebrating and supporting equality, diversity and inclusion

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) previously published insights on [undergraduate student applications](#). Their analysis showed that social work is the only subject that has more students from disadvantaged backgrounds applying, than from the most advantaged backgrounds. [Research](#) indicates that social work courses consistently host higher proportions of students who have a disability, as well as students from ethnic minoritised populations, than non-social work courses. This speaks to the attractiveness of social work as a profession to people from all walks of life, and the accessibility of social work as a career, which is something to be celebrated.


We are however aware of ongoing equality, diversity and inclusion challenges in social work education in England. In particular, challenges around race and career progression, as well as challenges in ensuring effective support for disabled and neurodiverse students and apprentices.

[Research](#) has also indicated that the following students may be more likely to fail elements of the course:

- male students
- disabled students
- students from global majority (non-white) backgrounds

[Further research](#) suggests that practice based learning can be particularly challenging for students from black or ethnic minority backgrounds and those who have experienced intersecting disadvantages. However, understanding the reasons for this are complex. These decisions may be influenced by the individual dynamic between student or apprentice and their practice educator. A student's experience, and attainment, may also be impacted by wider [structural inequalities within the higher education system](#).

"I found that the course was not well adapted for neurodivergent people, and the tutors struggled to know how to provide support for students like me."
Newly qualified social worker



We also recognise that students and apprentices may experience multiple, intersecting disadvantages. For example, a Black male student with a learning difference may face unique barriers in accessing equitable feedback and support. Embedding an intersectional approach is essential to fostering genuinely inclusive educational environments. Embedding anti-racist, anti-oppressive values in education also means ensuring that course content reflects diverse perspectives. This includes valuing community knowledge, lived experience, and culturally relevant models of social work.

Other issues with regards to widening participation and representation also persist, such as [lower numbers of men entering the profession](#). There have also been debates around academic entry requirements for social work courses, the level of prior experience an applicant should have of working with children or vulnerable adults, and students' readiness for the professional expectations of a work environment. Course providers are looking for applicants who have the capability and suitability to become a registered social worker on completion of their course. This must be balanced with what employer partners will expect from their future workforce, as well as the views and needs of people who use social work services.

Our [standards around admissions](#) require that course providers develop a holistic and multidimensional assessment process to decide whether an applicant is suitable to study social work. This includes testing their command of English, their potential to develop the knowledge and skills needed to meet the professional standards and their capability to meet academic standards. Course providers will consider applicant's prior relevant experience, which could be drawn from their work history or their own experiences of

social work. It also involves assessing an applicant's conduct, health and character, including criminal conviction checks.

Support through one-to-one coaching by Approach Social Work

Approach Social Work offers confidential one-to-one coaching sessions for people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. These are individuals who may have experienced trauma associated with racism and other types of discrimination. These sessions are targeted at those at risk of withdrawing from the programme. Coaching calls are also available for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, providing enhanced support throughout the application and assessment centre process.

In recent years, we have noted that entry requirements for postgraduate fast-track routes have changed. Courses such as Step Up to Social Work and Approach Social Work have relaxed the need for applicants to always demonstrate a maths qualification or a minimum 2:1 undergraduate degree award. This indicates efforts to widen access to the profession. It encourages applicants who can demonstrate their suitability for social work training through relevant experience and transferable skills. Beyond access, we recognise the need to focus on the retention and wellbeing of students and apprentices throughout their journey. A sense of inclusion, belonging and psychological safety within both academic and practice environments is essential for academic success.

Ensuring that social work education embeds anti-racist, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice is a key area of focus for us over the coming years. The ability for social work students and apprentices to practice inclusively, in line with the values and professional standards of social work, should be tested throughout their journey from application to graduation. We will progress this by embedding our [KSBs](#) in course curriculums, which include an explicit focus on anti-discriminatory practice.

Social work students and apprentices need to be mentored and nurtured by educators and practitioners who can effectively role-model inclusive practice. In turn, placement providers and course providers must be willing and able to act on experiences of racism, discrimination and prejudice within their own organisations. We are keen to further research the experiences of students and apprentices from traditionally marginalised groups, with a focus on their perceptions of practice based learning.

Operating in a complex landscape

In addition to the challenges experienced by individuals, we're aware that education providers and employers can be operating in a complex and, at times, challenging economic climate.

The cost of training a social worker is shared by many organisations and agencies. We are aware from our engagement with education providers and local authorities that some organisations are experiencing financial pressures. This comes from a combination of declining incomes, inflationary pressures and rising operational costs. In May 2025 the [Office for Students](#) reported that based on their analysis, 43% of universities and colleges

were forecasting a deficit for 2024 to 2025. Likewise, the [Committee of Public Accounts](#) reported that despite real terms funding increases, local government finance remains under pressure.

Within this context, social work courses are not immune from [institutional cost reduction programmes](#), aimed at improving resilience and financial stability. We know from our engagement with social work course teams that social work courses can be costly to run compared to other programmes. This is due to the high staff to student ratios required to provide effective supervision, the coordination of practice based learning, and enhanced pastoral support. We work closely with providers, through our annual monitoring and inspections, to understand where there have been changes to programmes or staffing. Our aim is to support where possible, and safeguard against any potential impact of course delivery and compliance.

Funding for social work education is split between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. Both departments support a diverse range of access to social work education and training. They also foster partnership working between employers, education providers and people with lived experience of social work. For example, the government provides funding via the [Education Support Grant](#). This grant supports the delivery of high quality practice based learning opportunities and promotes the involvement of people with lived experience in social work courses.

We have heard through our engagement with education providers this complex funding landscape can be challenging for course teams, applicants and employer partners to navigate. This is because funding comes from multiple sources depending on the social work route,

resulting in different fees and financial support for student social workers as well as for aspects of course delivery such as practice based learning. As an example of this, apprenticeship providers cannot access the Education Support Grant, which we have heard can create tensions between employers and course providers over who should bear the cost of supporting practice education. Navigating eligibility creates an administrative burden, particularly for education providers running multiple courses. This is set to evolve further, with the Department for Work and Pensions taking on responsibility for apprenticeships, skills and adult learning.

From 2016 to 2023 the [government provided funding for teaching partnerships](#) to stimulate regional partnerships between social work education providers, employers and placement providers. While many teaching partnerships are exploring ways to continue their work, this can be challenging at a time when both higher education and local authority budgets are strained. We see the benefits of formal partnership working between education providers and employers, through teaching partnerships or other local networks, particularly in relation to practice education. We encourage stakeholders to look for ways to sustain these strategic relationships, building on the existing infrastructure and relationships.

The West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership

The West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership is made up of 22 partners, including universities and local authorities. It supports the entire social work career pathway. By strengthening links between academia, practice, and people with lived experience of social work, the partnership ensures social workers are well prepared and supported to thrive throughout their careers.

The partnership promotes a research led, evidence based curriculum. It offers continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities aligned with workforce needs. Their CPD offer includes:

- an annual practice educators conference, celebrating practice educators from across the region with a day of speakers and workshops
- a social work supervisors programme, to ensure future managers have the skills to provide effective supervision to practitioners
- a valuing social work course to support the retention of experienced practitioners
- research seminars, people with lived experience seminars, and training covering social work policy and theory

The partnership also recruits and supports social workers to become 'practice consultants' in partner universities. Practice consultants deliver 6 days of teaching that align professional realities with the curriculum. In 2025, the partnership provided 35 social work consultants to teach at 8 universities, enhancing student learning while supporting their career development.

We acknowledge the challenges that many social work education providers and employers are facing in light of financial pressures within their institutions. But despite these challenges, we know that the majority of education providers and their partners continue to provide the best support possible for social work students and apprentices.

Social work courses also provide essential links between academics, researchers, practitioners and educators. This supports evidence informed practice. It also provides opportunities for social work practitioners and people with lived experience of social work to help shape the next generation of social workers.

The student experience

Increases in the cost of living since 2021 have impacted people across society, including students. In 2023 the [Office for National Statistics](#) reported that 78% of students were concerned that the rising cost of living may affect how well they do in their studies. 91% were either somewhat or very worried about the rising cost of living.

We know from enrollment data published by [Skills for Care](#) that social work students are also more likely to be mature and female than typical student cohorts. This may present additional financial pressures. For example, if students have dependents to provide for while they are studying. This is reflected in the provision of a [Childcare Allowance](#) for postgraduate students as part of the Social Work Bursary. It is also common for people studying social work to have additional costs, such as needing [access to a car](#) to travel for placement opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

We know from our engagement with social work students and apprentices that personal experiences of poverty, housing insecurity and lived experience of social work are not uncommon among social work cohorts. Overcoming these experiences can often be a powerful motivator for people to pursue a career in social work. It can also bring valuable diversity to the profession. However, the financial strain of undertaking a social work degree may act as a barrier to bringing more people into the profession.

“As a mature student with over 15 years of work experience, not being able to work due to being a student, in addition to the cost of living crisis, is not just a double whammy for me but a multiple one. My already very slim income (totally reliant on the money from student finance and social work bursaries) meant I was constantly calculating the cost of every step I took. I missed a lot of classes due to challenges around childcare.”

Social work student



"As a single parent, it affected me massively. Had I known how difficult this would be, I wouldn't have opted to take the course. I was told that the placements are "flexible" so I would have plenty of time to work- this is not the case. My time to work is severely restricted, my income has been majorly affected and the rising costs of living has just exacerbated these struggles."

Student social worker

"I had to work a part time job, some days I would start at 6:30am to do a short shift and then I would have to travel to university for 10am. I struggled to afford my driving lessons, this led to me not getting a job in social work until the following year after I got my degree as I had to save for lessons, a car, pay my rent, bills, food costs, and me and my partner were in the process of putting down a deposit for a house."

Newly qualified social worker

We have worked with education providers to ensure that they are proactive in signposting applicants and social work students to potential sources of financial support. For example, for care leavers and students with disabilities. We also encourage course providers to be transparent about potential hidden course costs. This can include transport for placements, as well as the difficulty of managing part time work alongside a course which involves significant periods of practice based learning.

Grants, salaries and bursaries

Financial support is available for social work students and apprentices. However, there are ongoing challenges with levels of support and availability of bursaries. This varies based on a range of factors including where a student lives, the course they choose to study, their level of study, and their personal circumstances. Beyond student finance, the main source of additional funding for social work students comes from the [social work bursary](#). The value of the [social work bursary in England has not changed since 2014](#).

Undergraduate students can only apply for the social work bursary once they have completed the first year of their studies, if they progress to the second year of their course. Postgraduate students may be eligible for additional funding from the childcare allowance, parents learning allowance, adult dependents allowance or disabled student allowances (all elements of the social work bursary).

Undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled on traditional, university based social work courses will pay tuition fees for each year of their studies. Fast track students and apprentices do not pay tuition fees and are not eligible for the Social Work Bursary. Instead, fast track students receive a bursary linked to their route of study. Meanwhile social work apprentices receive a salary, decided by their employer.

Experiences of social work students

“As an apprentice social worker in adult social care, I was already employed in a hospital social work team as a social care assessor. I joined this team in 2021. My salary has not changed and therefore I feel lucky to be able to study while earning a living wage. I could not have studied social work in any other route due to my finances.”

Social work apprentice

“I gave up a well-paid senior support worker role for 16 years in a London borough to study social work. I am relying on weekend work to pay my bills. This has not been easy, as I am on my own. I am having to go without luxuries, no takeaways or seeing friends, but I know it will all be worth it in the end.”

Social work student

“Managing my finances during the course was challenging. While I received a bursary, the amount I received did not seem to reflect the rising cost of living and barely covered my expenses and bills. On several occasions, I needed to draw on my savings to cover unexpected costs, such as car repairs. Additionally, being a student made me ineligible for some support, including access to free childcare, which added further stress to my financial situation”

Newly qualified social worker



The route a student or apprentice takes into the profession can significantly shape the financial support available during their studies, and the student debt they may incur. What is less explored is the impact that this may continue to have for social workers throughout their careers.

Social workers who are repaying student loans will have this deducted from their monthly salaries, once they have met a salary threshold. This means that for a substantial part of their career, they could have less take home pay per month than a colleague who qualified via a fast track course or a social work degree apprenticeship.

As a regulator we do not have control over the funding available to students or apprentices. However, we have an interest in ensuring that people receive adequate funding to fully engage in and successfully complete their course. We want to engage more with students, apprentices and newly qualified social workers to hear more about their experiences, so that their insights can inform government policy and support workforce planning in the future.



Looking to the future

This report has provided a valuable opportunity to share the learning from our first 5 years of regulating social work education in England. We've explored some of the emerging trends we're starting to see through the delivery of our quality assurance process and highlights some of the key developments, that are shaping the future of social work education. We hope this report is a useful resource for the sector to open up conversations about the direction of travel.

We'd like to thank those who have contributed to this publication, which has enabled us to draw on the views and experiences of those we have worked with. We'll continue to talk to, connect with, learn from and listen to the sector because coproduction and collaboration are at the heart of our approach.

We recognise that education providers and employers continue to face a range of challenges in a changing landscape. We know that the delivery of qualifying education is complex and it's been great to see how the sector has adapted positively and creatively to meet some of these challenges. Getting to know the sector through the delivery of our regulation has given us a chance to see the shared passion and commitment of those training the next generation of social workers. We are also mindful of some of the trends outlined in this report around issues of financial stability within course providers and some local authorities alongside shifts in different pipelines and student profiles into the profession, which we will continue to monitor closely.

As we come to the end of our current strategic cycle, we're starting to think about our future ambitions for social work education and training. Reflecting on our experiences of this first reapproval cycle has been invaluable and will inform our work going forwards.

Working in partnership with providers and the social work sector, we will use our learning to improve the consistency and quality of courses. This in turn, will ensure the readiness of graduates for professional practice. This includes the intended review of our education and training standards and streamlining our existing guidance. We'll also bring our KSBs into regulation to strengthen consistency in how different courses are preparing students and apprentices to meet the professional standards and begin their practice.

We have commenced our first reapproval cycle for AMHP and BIA courses. Our approach is informed and shaped by our learnings from the first cycle of inspections of social work courses. We are also exploring the many opportunities to use the tools at our disposal to support other specialist areas of practice. This includes practice education, where we'll look to create regulatory frameworks that will help to ensure quality and consistency in social work training.

This report demonstrates our ongoing commitment to share more about our learning in this important area. This is so that course providers can learn from the experiences of others, as we embark on the next chapter of our ambitions to raise the standards of social work education.

Social work continues to play a vitally important part in society's support and protection of vulnerable people. Entrants to the profession need to be fully prepared to engage in a range of challenging tasks. As such, qualifying education must be up to the task of delivering a strong, compassionate and knowledgeable workforce. Evidence presented here shows that even in challenging times, routes into the profession remain of a high standard assured through our positive approach to regulation.

As the regulator for the social work profession, with responsibility for quality assuring all education and training provision, it is important for us to gather and share insight about experiences of social work education on the ground. Whether this reflects challenges in securing high quality practice based learning opportunities, the struggle to retain practice educators in their vital roles, or the lived experiences of students as they navigate the cost-of-living crisis. We recognise that we have a role to play in communicating these issues, and their potential impact on the profession, to help inform government policy.

Our aim is to ensure social work education is sustainable, inclusive and future-focused. This is so all those completing approved courses are equipped to begin safe, effective practice and are best placed to enter such an important and rewarding profession and to thrive.



Appendix A: Which standards were most likely to have conditions set against them?

We have reviewed all the conditions set in the inspections from our first reapproval cycle. This helps us to better understand why we were more likely to set against certain standards. We have also explored where we were more likely to provide recommendations against some standards over others.

This section shares the findings from this analysis. It focuses on the more significant issues alongside our own reflections. We present this under the 6 areas of the standards.

Where percentages are given, these are the number of courses as a percentage of the total number of inspection reports considered (256) across 257 inspections. This is because one course had its approval withdrawn without conditions being set.

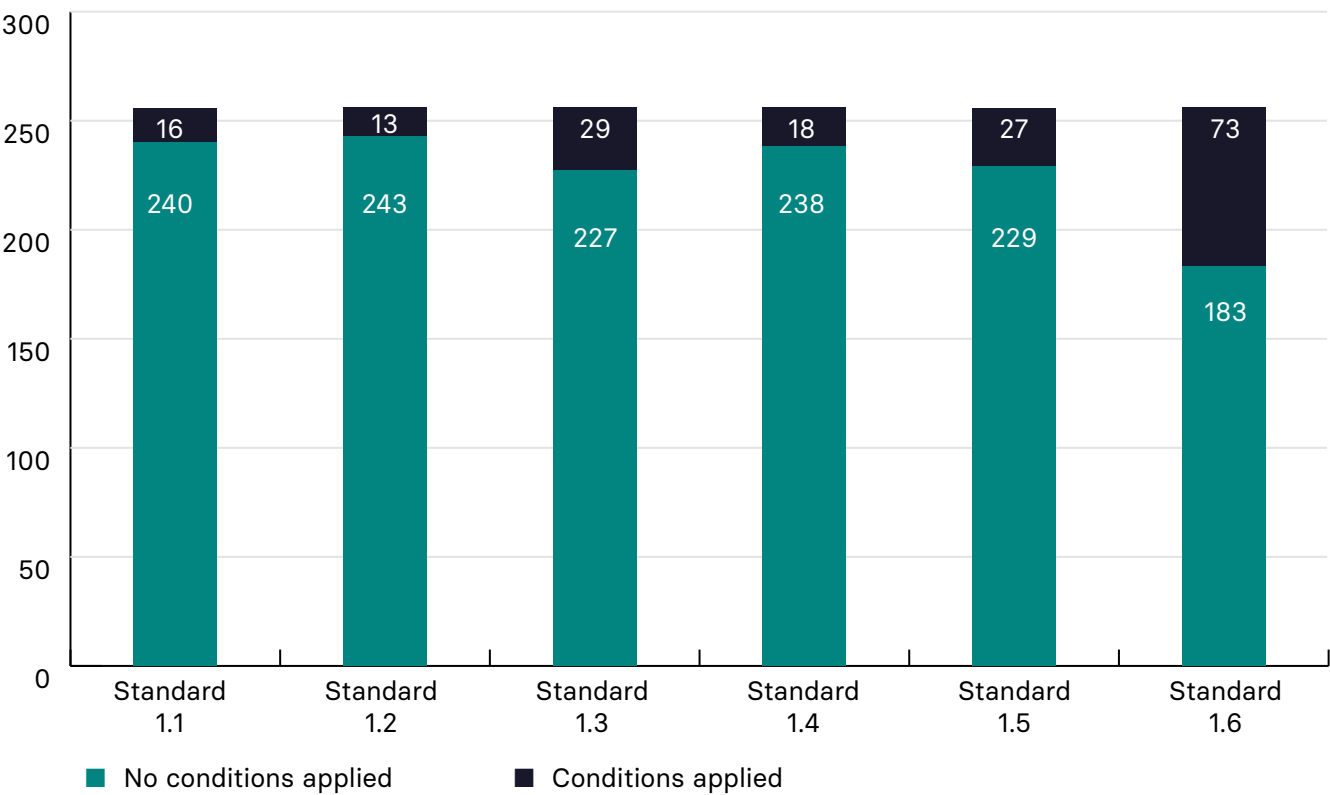


Standard 1: Admissions

We expect education providers to demonstrate to us that admissions processes are robust, transparent, ensure that applicants meet course entry requirements and involve a range of stakeholders.

Within standard 1, courses were most likely to have a condition set against the standards in Graph 9.

Graph 9. Standard 1: Number of courses which had conditions set, by standard



Standard 1.3 Ensure that employers, placement providers and people with lived experience of social work are involved in the admissions process.

11.2% of courses received a condition against standard 1.3. Conditions often required further evidence of how stakeholders would be meaningfully involved in the design and delivery of the admissions process. For example, evidence of a single episode of involvement, such as a person with lived experience participating in an interview panel, is less compelling. Evidence of a coherent approach to ensuring that people with lived experience of social work will be involved in interviewing candidates each year, is more compelling. Conditions were also likely to highlight the training and support needed for external stakeholders involved in admissions processes.

Our reflections on this standard

Education providers inspected early in the reapproval cycle were still navigating the impact of COVID-19 to deliver aspects of teaching and learning remotely. COVID-19 adjustments also impacted admissions processes. Events previously delivered in person, such as interviews for candidates or assessment days, had to be delivered online.

This also presented some challenges for inspection teams. They had to assess evidence of an adjusted admissions process, the previous process, and how it may change in the future. Education providers which had made adjustments to continue involving stakeholders in the admissions process were less likely to receive a condition against this standard.

We positively noted a number of education providers taking steps to mitigate the impact of digital exclusion or poverty on potential applicants. They, offer access to laptops so that candidates could fully participate in the admissions process under these circumstances.

Standard 1.6 Ensure that the admissions process gives applicants the information they require to make an informed choice about whether to take up an offer of a place on a course. This will include information about the professional standards, research interests and placement opportunities.

For standard 1.6, 28.4% of courses received a condition, while 20.1% received a recommendation. These conditions were often related to administrative issues within material aimed at potential applicants. This material is essential to enabling students and apprentices to make fully informed choices. To meet this standard, information regarding the admission process and course documentation must be clearly presented, including around placement details. It was common for conditions to require education providers to update their web pages for social work courses. It is essential that material on the university website is correct and up to date and makes direct reference to Social Work England as the regulator.

Our reflections on this standard

Ensuring that information provided to applicants is accurate and up to date can become more complicated when courses are delivered in partnership with other organisations. For example, the admissions process for Step Up to Social Work courses is initially delivered by the Department for Education. This can mean that applicants receive information about their course from different sources at different points in the admissions journey.

Apprentices are often reliant on their employer or sponsor organisation to provide information about their apprenticeship. This is because they have less direct contact with the higher education provider during the admissions process. Even in these circumstances, the education provider must ensure that the information provided to applicants is clear.

As part of our reapproval inspections we have spoken with applicants to apprenticeship and Step up to Social Work courses. Some did not know when applying for their social work course where they would be studying, that their course would involve travel to a university campus, or that they would be studying for a degree level qualification. These are extreme examples to illustrate that even getting basic information to applicants can become complicated when they are not directly applying to a university based course.

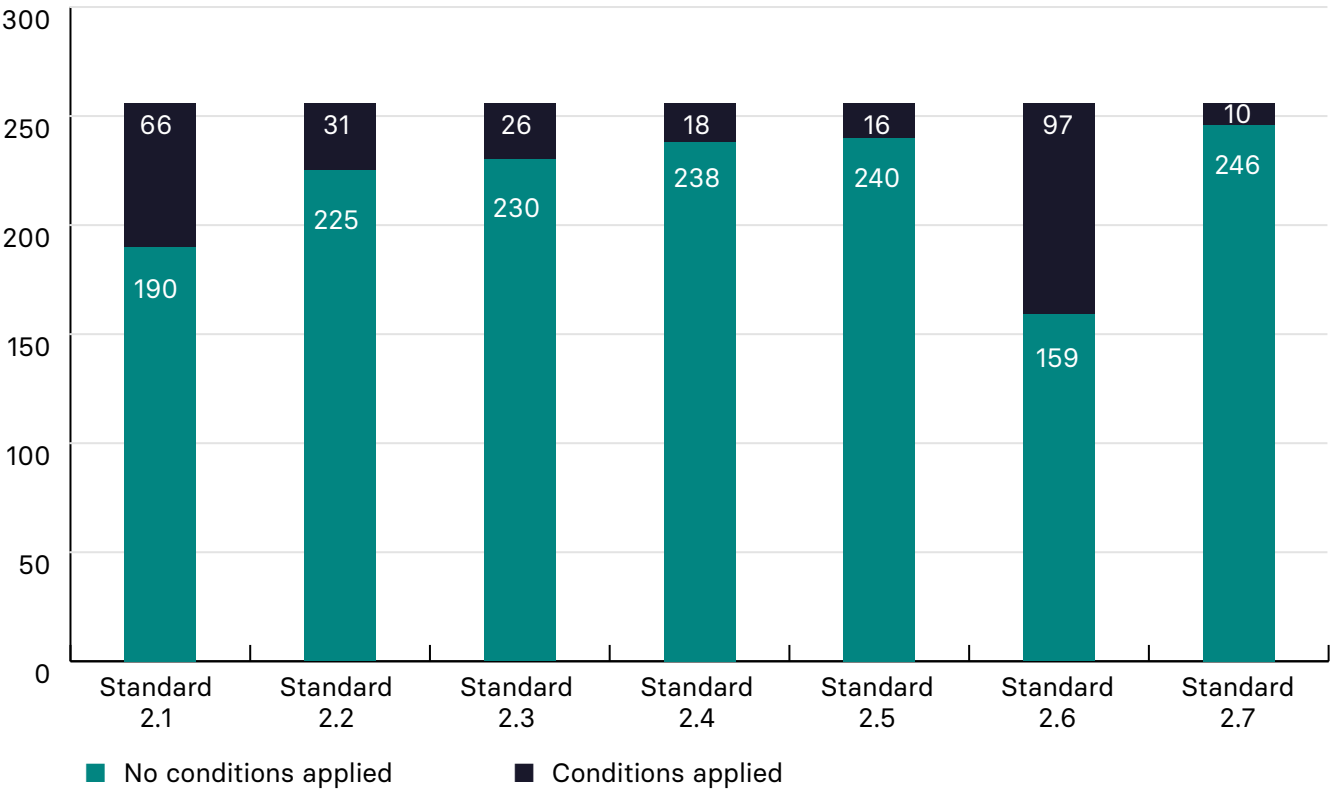
Standard 2: Learning environment

The learning environment must provide education and training opportunities that enable students and apprentices to develop their skills and knowledge across all areas of social work. They must gain experience and meet the professional

standards in supportive, supervised and safe practice settings.

Within standard area 2, courses were most likely to have a condition set against the standards set out in Graph 10.

Graph 10. Standard 2: Number of courses who had conditions set, by standard



2.1 Ensure that students spend at least 200 days (including up to 30 skills days) gaining different experiences and learning in practice settings.

Placements

For standard 2.1, 25.6% of courses received a condition, while 15.1% received a recommendation. These high figures reflect the complexities around providing practice based learning opportunities and skills days for social work courses.

Conditions and recommendations applied to this standard often focused on the operational delivery of practice based learning. In some cases, more evidence was required to show how placements were sourced and arranged with employer partners. Education providers are also needed to demonstrate that robust quality assurance processes were in place. For some courses, further evidence of how education providers would ensure sufficient contrast between placements needed to be strengthened. For example, apprenticeship providers needed to evidence that apprentices would have the opportunity to move between teams within their local authorities.

Skills days

The delivery of skills days formed a strong theme in the conditions and recommendations applied. As with placements, how skills days were counted, and attendance monitored were a common issue. The role of skills days in topping up placement days also needed to be communicated clearly to students and apprentices. Inspectors also reported some exemplary examples of skills days. These provided opportunities for students and apprentices to learn from people with lived experience of social work, explore interdisciplinary working, learn directly from local social workers, or prepare for practice based learning.

Provision for students and apprentices who had missed skills days was sometimes found to be insufficient. There were examples of course providers not having clear contingency plans in place for a missed skills day. Inspectors highlighted an example of positive practice in this area, where an education provider had scheduled over 30 skills days across the course to provide choice and variety to students and apprentices, as well as opportunities to make up any missed learning.

Our reflections on this standard

Placements

It continued to be a challenge for some education providers to give clarity on how all students would have access to practice based learning opportunities. This included opportunities in statutory settings or those involving suitable statutory tasks. This particularly applied to providers delivering traditional undergraduate and postgraduate routes.

We have noted throughout our reapproval inspections that education providers may make assumptions about the requirements in our standards around the delivery of practice based learning. Although it's common to have a 70 day and a 100 day placement, plus 30 skills days, the standards allow for flexibility and innovation in the design of practice based learning. This is as long as a minimum of 200 days of practice learning is embedded within the course. We set out specific requirements for these days in our practice placement guidance.

2.6 Ensure that practice educators are on the register and that they have the relevant and current knowledge, skills and experience to support safe and effective learning.

More courses had conditions set against this standard than any other across all the standards (37.7% of courses had a condition applied, and 12% of courses received a recommendation).

Conditions related to this standard almost always related to 'how' and 'where' the course retained evidence about practice educators. We looked for evidence that practice educators were both registered and appropriately trained and skilled.

Often the relevant database existed but was kept within one or more partner organisations. It is important, as we only approve an education provider, if this information is accessible and quality assured by the education provider. Given the key role of practice educators in the assessment and learning of social work students and apprentices, it is important these databases are well maintained and regularly updated.

Records around practice educators often focused on evidencing registration. To meet this standard, some course providers needed to place greater emphasis on the practice educators' experience and evidence of training they had undertaken.

Our reflections on this standard

Where conditions were not set against this standard, we observed clear commitment from education providers to maintaining relationships with practice educators. This included keeping up to date and current records. It also included providing opportunities for practice educators across the academic year to engage in refresher training, peer networks, and learning opportunities through conferences or events.

We acknowledge the effort and resource that this requires. We observed that these arrangements were often more sustainable when delivered in partnership with local employers and teaching partnerships.

We recognise that practice educators play a pivotal role in supporting social work students during their practice placements. We are also aware of some of the challenges facing practice education and the broader education sector. There are many opportunities for Social Work England to use tools at our disposal to build a more robust understanding of practice education. Creating regulatory frameworks will help to ensure quality and consistency in social work training. With additional funding from the Department for Education (DfE), we are working with sector stakeholders to develop our understanding of this part of the workforce and consider supporting frameworks.

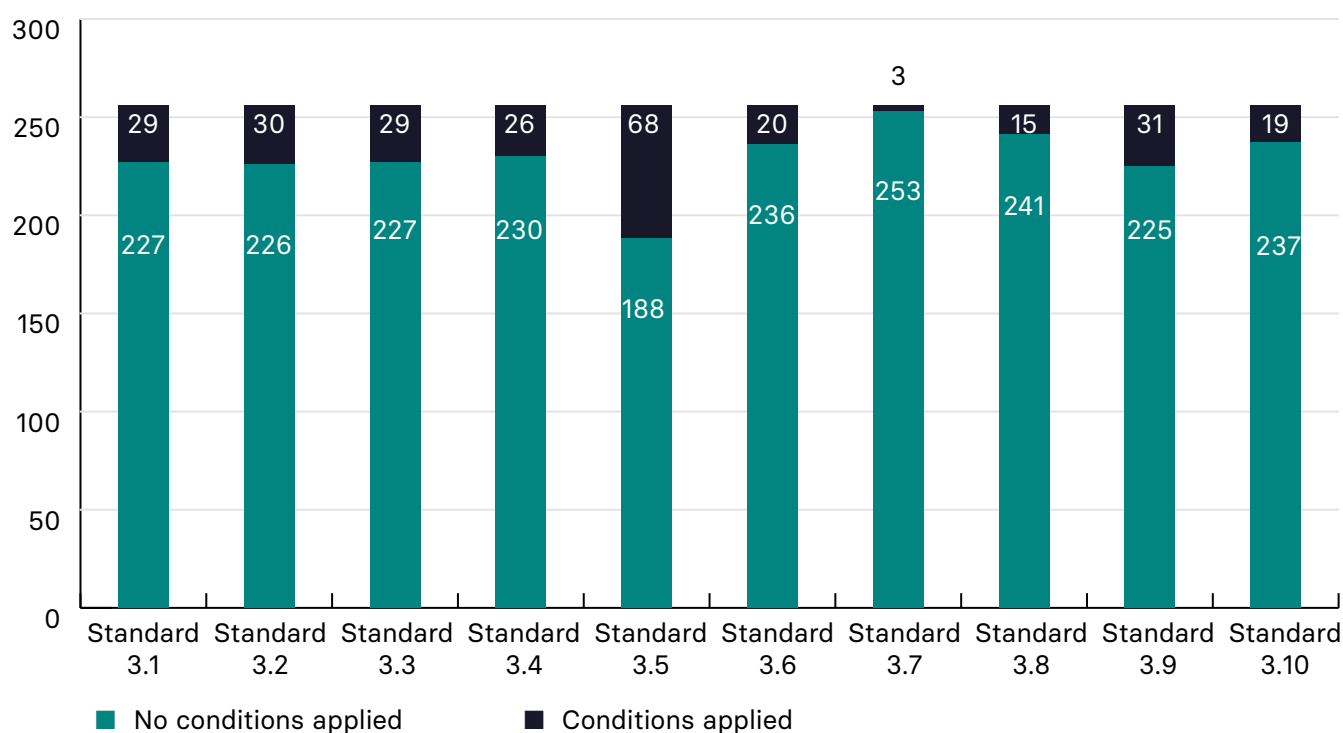
Standards 3: Course governance, management and quality

Social work courses must be governed, resourced and managed using effective and transparent processes. Course providers must do this in collaboration with employers and people with lived experience of social work. There must be

processes to monitor and manage the quality and delivery of courses.

Within standard area 3, courses were most likely to have a condition set against the standards outlined in Graph 11.

Graph 11. Standard 3: Number of courses who had conditions set, by standard



3.5 Ensure that regular and effective monitoring, evaluation and improvement systems are in place, and that these involve employers, people with lived experience of social work, and students.

26.4% of courses had conditions set against this standard, while recommendations were applied for 11.6% of courses. This standard typically attracted conditions related to effective stakeholder engagement with programme development and quality assurance.

The standard ensures that programmes examine the data they have about their effectiveness with employers, students and people with lived experience. It's important that courses can evidence meaningful engagement with each of these groups.

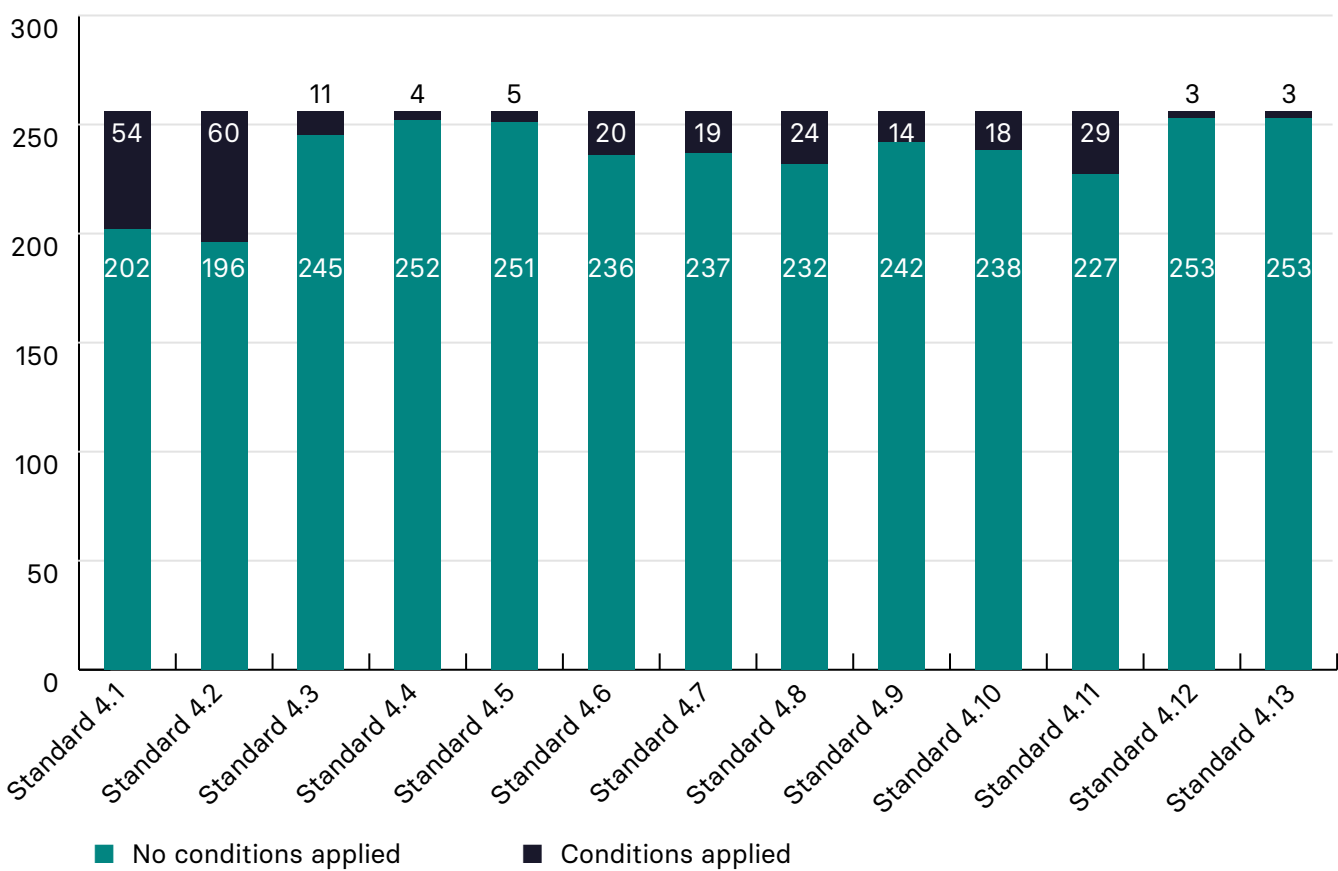
Additionally, stakeholder engagement needs to be of a suitable depth. Routine monitoring, such as gathering student feedback after a module, is important. More importantly regular engagement with different stakeholders should be a driving force shaping and maintaining high quality course delivery.

Standard 4: Curriculum and assessment

Courses providers must design course which enable students and apprentices to develop the required behaviours, skills, knowledge and understanding to meet the professional standards.

Within standard 4, courses were most likely to have a standard set against the following standards in Graph 12.

Graph 12. Standard 4: Number of courses who had conditions set, by standard



4.1 Ensure that the content, structure and delivery of the training is in accordance with relevant guidance and frameworks and is designed to enable students to demonstrate that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the professional standards.

For this standard, conditions were applied for 21% of courses. Most focused either on mapping of learning outcomes to professional outcomes, or attendance monitoring. This is a complex standard which interacts with all elements of the course.

Our reflections on this standard

Mapping learning outcomes to professional standards

Broadly, conditions relating to this standard were about making direct links between what students were taught and how learning outcomes in the programme linked to our professional standards. Social Work England, in this time period, did not provide detailed guidance or direction around curriculum. Social work courses typically constructed grids linking module content to the professional capabilities framework (PCF) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmarking Statements for Social Work. A greater focus on mapping directly to professional standards here would create more clarity and reduce duplication of activities.

Monitoring attendance

An area that commonly resulted in conditions for 4.1 was around attendance monitoring. This, particularly related to attendance (and completion) of skills days. This requirement has strong links with standards 2.1 and 5.6. We dealt with it in more detail in the discussion of standard 2.1.

4.2 Ensure that the views of employers, practitioners and people with lived experience of social work are incorporated into the design, ongoing development and review of the curriculum.

For this standard, conditions were applied for 23.3% of courses, while recommendations were applied for 14.7% of courses. Like standard 3.5, this standard emphasises the importance of ensuring key stakeholders are involved in the curriculum from its initial design.

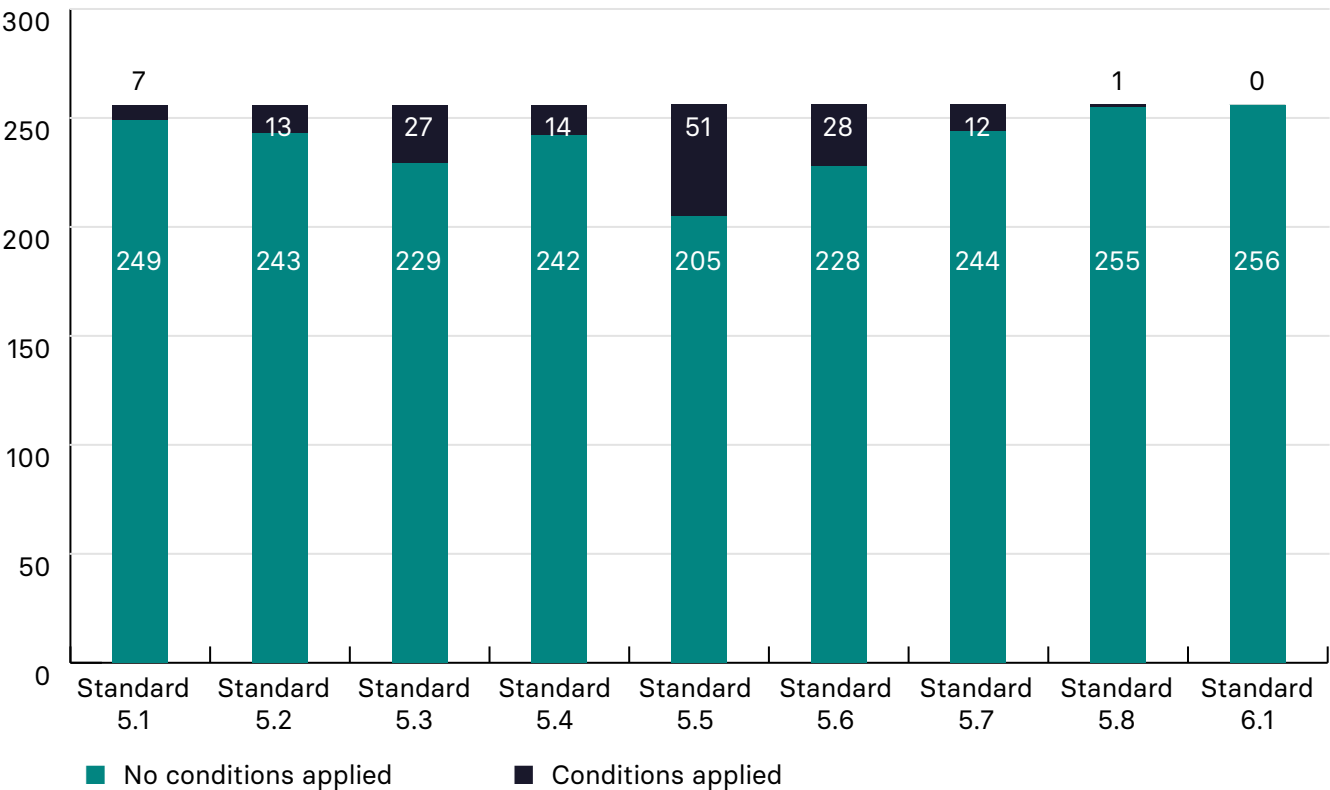
Sometimes providers needed to involve people with lived experience in curriculum development at a strategic level. Similarly, employers have a very important contribution to make to the design of a local social work curriculum. This is essential given that they may recruit from the graduate pool. Conditions might also be set where we felt that the arrangements for incorporating such views were irregular or consistent over time.

Standards 5 and 6: Supporting students

Students and apprentices must receive appropriate educational and pastoral support. Within standard areas 5 and

6, courses were most likely to have a condition set against the standards in Graph 13.

Graph 13. Standards 5 and 6: Number of courses who had conditions set, by standard



5.5 Provide information to students about their curriculum, practice placements, assessments and transition to registered social worker including information on requirements for continuing professional development.

For this standard, conditions were applied in 19.8% of courses, while recommendations were applied in 13.6% of courses. Conditions typically related to the clarity and sufficiency of detail in the programme handbook (or similar) for students and apprentices. It's important that such documents include all the information needed by students and apprentices, including information on how they would progress through the course.

We have also set conditions in areas where insufficient detail was provided around how social work qualifying programmes enable student social workers and apprentices to become eligible to register as social workers. We have also asked some courses to provide more detail on the professional landscape of CPD. Others needed to ensure students and apprentices had information about the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and other post-qualifying learning opportunities and requirements. This is an area that will continue to be monitored to ensure that course providers continue to adapt to changes within the post-qualifying space.

6.1 The threshold entry route to the register will normally be a bachelor's degree with honours in social work.

We have reported on standard 6.1. However, as the stipulation is that the threshold entry route to the register will normally be a bachelor's degree with honours in social work, course providers cannot fail this standard.

What happens next?

Following their inspection, all 207 course providers which were approved with conditions were able to demonstrate to us that they had met any conditions set as part of the reapproval process. They provided further evidence to show how they had taken steps to address the actions required to meet our standards. When a course provider meets all conditions, we approve their course and their inspection report is updated to reflect this. All [inspection reports](#) are publicly available on our website.

