

Business plan 2024 to 2025

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Foreword

Our business plan for 2024 to 2025 outlines what we aim to achieve during the year. It doesn't describe everything we will do, but highlights our priority objectives and our key deliverables and measurements for each area of focus within the plan. It has been developed based on the learning and experiences we've gained over previous years, and on our longer term objectives contained in our corporate strategy. We'll be guided by our values and culture, by our legislation and statutory responsibilities, and by our ongoing commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion

Social workers are an essential part of the health and social care workforce for both adults and children. As the regulator for social workers in England, we have a unique insight across the whole of the profession. We'll use this knowledge to inform, influence and support the developments in policy and practice, such as:

- the reform of children's social care
- the roll out of the apprenticeship programme across adults and children's statutory social work
- building capacity in adult mental health services
- supporting the role of social work in the NHS

We've made good progress on creating education and training approval standards for approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) and best interests assessors (BIAs). We plan to publish the standards and guidance in the early part of this year. Building on this, we plan to develop a model of regulation for specialist and advanced practice.

We'll complete the reapproval process for all initial social work education and training courses. We'll also be publishing our readiness for professional practice guidance this year, and a key focus will be reviewing our education and training standards in preparation for a public consultation in 2025/2026.

It's important to acknowledge that timeliness in the fitness to practise process, in particular at the hearings stage, remains a challenge but we're working determinedly to address this. This includes identifying opportunities to improve the timeliness, efficiency and effectiveness of our process with the resources we have available.

As we move into maturity, we'll focus on our digital services through which so much of our engagement with the public and the profession takes place. Technology is continually evolving and we'll be exploring how technological advancements might offer improvements in engagement and communication, as well as securing greater efficiency and effectiveness.

We believe that co-production improves our actions and makes them more impactful. We value our external relationships and look forward to working with key stakeholders during the year. In addition to this, the combined experience and knowledge of our Board members will ensure that our activities remain in line with this year's objectives.

All of this activity can only be delivered through the hard work, commitment, skills and knowledge of our people and partners. Everyone in the organisation has an important role to play in helping to deliver our plans and contribute to protecting the public, enabling positive change in social work and improving people's lives.

Colum Conway

Chief Executive, Social Work England

Our strategy for 2023 to 2026

Our [strategy](#) for 2023 to 2026 is based around 3 strategic themes:

- **Prevention and impact:** building trust and confidence within a safer practice environment.
- **Regulation and protection:** being transparent, efficient, responsive and fair in how we regulate.
- **Delivery and improvement:** putting our people at the heart of the positive change we want to drive.

Across these themes, we have identified 10 strategic objectives that we aim to achieve over 3 years. This business plan sets out the work we will do in the second year of our strategy, to ensure we are on track to achieve our strategic objectives.

Our strategy on a page

Our purpose:

To regulate social workers in England so that people receive the best possible support whenever they might need it in life.

Our strategic themes:

Prevention and impact



Building trust and confidence within a safer practice environment.

Regulation and protection



Being transparent, efficient, responsive and fair in how we regulate.

Delivery and improvement



Putting our people at the heart of the positive change we want to drive.

Our guiding principles:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded in all that we do - driving positive change, valuing diversity and representing society
- We will listen to, engage with and co-produce alongside those who are directly impacted by our work
- We will learn through data and use insight to understand our impact and inform our plans

Our values:

- Fearless
- Independent
- Transparent
- Ambitious
- Collaborative
- Integrity

The year ahead

Our objectives for 2024 to 2025 focus on areas of change or where we are starting new pieces of work. Alongside these objectives, we'll continue to deliver our statutory regulatory functions. Many of our [key performance indicators](#) are focused on our regulatory activity.

For 2 of our strategic objectives, we haven't set specific objectives this year. We'll continue to work towards these strategic objectives by building on activities that we started in 2023 to 2024.

In 2024 to 2025, we expect to:

- renew registration for around 100,000 social workers
- process around 8,000 applications to join the register
- respond to around 65,000 phone calls and emails
- receive around 1,700 fitness to practise concerns
- conduct around 400 investigations
- make over 3,000 decisions about fitness to practise cases
- review around 600 current sanctions
- approve or reapprove 94 initial social work education and training courses
- engage with around 10,000 people through a range of events across the year

How we'll monitor progress

Evaluation is core to how we operate, how we improve, and how we are held to account for our activities and the public money we are spending. We'll monitor progress towards delivering our objectives and meeting the key performance indicators to check that we are on track. We will report to our board each quarter. Throughout the year, we'll closely review our plans to make sure they remain achievable and that we continue to use our resources efficiently and effectively.

Our plan on a page for 2024 to 2025

 Our business plan for 2024 to 2025			
Our values Fearless Independent	Prevention and impact 	We'll work to prevent harm - engage with the profession and the public to build confidence in social work - share research and analysis to support wider learning - inform, influence and support government reform for social work - develop regulation models for specialist and advanced practice - review how social workers show they meet our professional standards - develop our approach to inspections, reapprovals and quality assurance for specialist practice courses - start a review of our education and training standards - launch our readiness for professional practice guidance	Our guiding principles Equality, diversity and inclusion Co-production
	Regulation and protection 	We'll balance protection and proportionality - review our registration renewal approach - review in-house options for aspects of fitness to practise advocacy - explore options to support more efficient hearings processes - improve the timeliness, efficiency and effectiveness of our regulation processes - enhance our engagement with our single points of contact network	
	Delivery and improvement 	We'll keep evolving the ways we work - enhance our leadership and management development offer - review ways of working to support our culture and values	

Prevention and impact

We believe that it is better, where possible, to seek to prevent harm. This approach to public protection will have an increasing focus in how we regulate and the new work we'll do to get ahead of the curve.

Success will be underpinned by building trust and confidence with the profession and creating a clear understanding of the need for, and responsibilities of, professional regulation. This will be supported by a more powerful and insight driven approach to data and change. We'll also look at the social work practice environment to identify risk factors.

Strategic objective 1: Build trust and confidence in the social work profession, and in regulation, by strengthening our relationship with the sector

In 2023, we commissioned [research into public confidence in the profession and our regulation](#). We complemented this research by launching a [survey with social workers about their perceptions of the profession](#). These activities are informing the way we communicate and engage with the profession and the public. The research and the survey will also provide a baseline to measure our progress against in the coming years.

During 2024 to 2025, we'll continue to seek out opportunities to inform, educate and influence others on the varied role social work plays within society. Alongside this, we'll focus our engagement activity on the ethics, behaviours and standards that underpin safe and effective social work practice.

Our objective for 2024 to 2025:

- 1.1 Further develop our engagement and communication with the social work profession, key stakeholders and the public, to build trust and confidence in social work.

Strategic objective 2: Share the data and insight we hold about the social work profession and our regulation. This will help us to support leaders and policy makers to drive change, and ensure our processes are safe and fair

In 2023, we co-produced and started to deliver our data and insight strategy. This strategy sets out how we aim to use the data and insight that we have, to make evidence-led improvements in our work and across the social work profession, by harnessing the power of the data and insight that we hold.

During the year, we started to publish regular data on registration and fitness to practise. In September 2023, we published our [initial analysis of diversity data in our fitness to practise process](#), following on from the publication of our [state of the nation report](#). This set out what we learnt about the profession in our first 3 years of regulation, including diversity data for 95% of social workers.

In 2024 to 2025, we will build on this activity by sharing more of our data to increase transparency and support wider learning. We'll further advance our analysis of diversity in fitness to practise. We'll also continue to develop our programme of research to deepen our evidence base on regulation and the social work profession.

Our objective for 2024 to 2025:

- 2.1 Publish our research findings, thematic reviews and analysis of the data we have to increase openness and transparency, and support wider learning, as part of our ongoing communication and engagement.

Strategic objective 3: Collaborate with other sector leaders to develop a clear and shared understanding of risks to the public and agree how to manage those risks

We collaborated with the Department for Education and other stakeholders during 2023 to 2024 on plans for children's social care reform. This included an early career framework for children and families social workers, and proposals around the potential regulation of children's residential care home managers.

We started work in 2023 to 2024 on how we might better understand levels of stakeholder engagement and trust in our work. We'll continue this work through the year ahead.

Last year, we published our response to our consultation on education and training approval standards for approved mental health professionals (AMHPs) and best interests assessors (BIAs). We'll now start to consider how we want to develop a closer relationship with people working in these and other specialist and advanced roles.

Our objectives for 2024 to 2025:

- 3.1 Inform, influence and support the development of government reform for social care and social work.
- 3.2 Develop a model of regulating specialist and advanced practice, with the potential for annotations to a social worker's registration status.
- 3.3 Learn more about how social workers use continuing professional development (CPD) and review our related requirements for how social workers demonstrate that they meet our professional standards.

Strategic objective 4: Ensure all social work students receive comprehensive and consistent education and training, in a supportive and inclusive learning environment to prepare them for practice

During 2023 to 2024, we established the Social Work Education and Training Advisory Forum to help shape our [approach to social work education and training](#). We consulted with the forum to develop guidance on readiness for professional practice. We'll finalise the guidance in 2024 and work with the forum to guide its implementation.

We continued our programme to inspect and reapprove initial social work education and training courses. We've made reapproval decisions against our education and training standards for two-thirds of the courses.

During 2024 to 2025, we'll inspect and make reapproval decisions for the remaining courses and have a fuller picture of how well all initial social work education and training courses are meeting our standards. We'll use the learning from the reapprovals process to inform a review of our standards and look at how we can ensure our approach to inspections, reapprovals and quality assurance is effective and sustainable.

Our objectives for 2024 to 2025:

- 4.1 Develop our approach to inspections, reapprovals and quality assurance for education and training courses that prepare social workers for specialist practice, including approved mental health professionals and best interest assessors.
- 4.2 Review learning from our inspections of social work courses and conduct an initial review of our education and training standards in preparations for a public consultation in 2025 to 2026.
- 4.3 Launch our readiness for professional practice guidance, including knowledge, skills and behaviour statements developed with the sector, in partnership with the Education and Training Advisory Forum.

Regulation and protection

We'll ensure that all of our regulatory activity continues to strike the right balance between protection and proportionality. We will ensure that our work is fair, transparent, as efficient as possible, and in the public interest. We'll identify and implement new approaches to local areas handling concerns raised, where safe and appropriate. We will continue to encourage and promote effective regulation. This includes our continuing professional development (CPD) requirement to demonstrate to the public that social workers meet our professional standards.

Strategic objective 5: Ensure that our registration processes are fair, responsive and efficient

In 2023 to 2024, we reviewed our registration and advice processes to identify opportunities to improve timeliness, fairness and quality. This work included specific focus on overseas applications and misuse of title cases, including publishing new guidance on misuse of title cases. During 2024 to 2025, we'll implement the changes we've identified and further develop our approach.

Our objective for 2024 to 2025:

- 5.1 Review our approach to registration renewal and consider whether existing arrangements offer the right balance between public protection, public confidence in the profession, and efficiency.

Strategic objective 6: Review our fitness to practise case resolution approach, to improve service quality and fairness, and ensure value for money

In 2023 to 2024, we focused on reviewing and analysing our approach to fitness to practise, to identify actions for improvement. Along with work to ensure our hearings process delivers value for money, we focused on the quality of accepted disposals decision making, timeliness of interim orders, quality of voluntary removal decisions and efficiency and outcomes of case examiner decision reviews.

In 2024 to 2025, we'll implement our learning and continue to monitor how we're performing in these areas. We'll focus on how we can encourage better engagement with social workers at an early stage. We'll also explore further opportunities to improve quality, fairness and value for money. This includes our ongoing work on analysis of diversity in fitness to practise, and implementation of our quality framework for case examiners.

Through our case review function, we'll also work with social workers who are subject to reviewable sanctions, to support them with their return to unrestricted practice. This is an important part of ensuring social workers can remain in the workforce where it's appropriate and safe for them to do so.

Our objectives for 2024 to 2025:

- 6.1 Review the options for bringing aspects of our fitness to practise advocacy in-house, to improve timeliness and reduce cost.
- 6.2 Explore alternative options for disposing of cases referred for a hearing, and review the further use of options available in our legislation to support more efficient hearings processes.
- 6.3 Apply learning to improve the timeliness, efficiency and effectiveness of our triage, investigations, and case examiner processes, with a focus on early engagement with social workers.

Strategic objective 7: Develop our work with employers and the public to resolve more concerns locally (where it is safe and appropriate to do so)

Over the past few years, we've developed a network of single points of contact with employers of social workers. By having a single point of contact within each major employer, we aim to support organisations to manage and respond to our requests for information. This enables us to progress our investigations as quickly as possible, and where appropriate, support employers to resolve concerns locally.

During 2023 to 2024, we continued to establish and embed this network. Our regional engagement leads play a key role in supporting the network and ensuring our contacts remain up to date as people move between roles and organisations.

In 2024 to 2025, we'll grow and develop the network, building on the learning from our evaluation of the network in 2023 to 2024. We'll use our own data and insight, alongside

intelligence we gather through the network, to strengthen preventative responses to emerging regulatory issues. We'll use our regional engagement leads to broaden the scope of the network, increasing collaboration to better understand the national, regional and system issues affecting the profession.

Our objective for 2024 to 2025:

- 7.1 Grow and develop our single points of contact network to cover all major employers of social workers in England and increase engagement with the network to support preventative responses to emerging regulatory concerns.

Delivery and improvement

To deliver our ambitions, we'll continue to evolve from a new organisation creating systems and processes for the first time, to consolidating our people and functions, and moving into maturity.

We'll focus on continuous improvement of the approaches and systems which underpin our work. Key to this are our digital services through which so much of our engagement with the public and the profession takes place, and the governance and oversight which ensure we are accountable for what we do. Our people strategy will enhance our role as a diverse and inclusive employer who embraces putting people at the heart of change.

Strategic objective 8: Further develop our digital channels and services, to ensure they are inclusive and focused on user experience

During 2023 to 2024, we continued to develop our digital services. We focused on changes to improve how we manage documents and communications related to fitness to practise, and began to improve the accessibility of our digital services for external users. We started research with users about the process for raising concerns with us. This is so that people are well informed about the sort of concerns we can deal with and that our digital services make the process easy to understand.

In 2024 to 2025, supported by our user research, we'll deliver further accessibility improvements to our digital channels and services, and continue to develop our case management system to increase efficiency and enable more effective management of performance.

We'll also be looking at how we can use new technologies to improve how we work. This will include considering how artificial intelligence might offer opportunities to improve efficiency and effectiveness, giving careful consideration to any potential implications for privacy and fairness.

We'll continue to develop our data architecture to streamline our data management and analysis. We'll also be thinking about what all of this work means for a future digital strategy.

Strategic objective 9: Be a diverse and inclusive employer, which supports and motivates its people so they can deliver for the people we serve

In 2023 to 2024, we began implementing our people strategy for 2023 to 2026. Our priority areas are attraction, retention and workforce planning, cultivating our strong and inclusive culture, health and wellbeing, and leadership and talent development. We began reviewing our recruitment approach to see how we might attract a wider range of candidates to improve the diversity of our workforce. We'll continue this work and implement the learning throughout 2024 to 2025.

We also began delivery of learning and development programmes for our registration, and fitness to practise teams. In 2024 to 2025, we'll continue to review our offer for these teams, with the aim of defining and implementing core learning pathways.

We've identified external benchmarking tools to help us understand how well we're delivering on our people and development strategy, and improving equality, diversity and inclusion. We'll continue to use these tools to benchmark our progress during 2024 to 2025.

At the start of 2023, we launched our first positive action mentoring scheme. The second iteration of the scheme will continue through 2024. Effective leadership and management plays a crucial role in achieving our objectives and supporting our people to deliver, perform and develop in their careers. This is a core principle of our people strategy. We've put in place targeted leadership development opportunities, including 360 degree feedback. We'll continue to look at how we can further develop our leadership and management offer.

Our objectives for 2024 to 2025:

- 9.1 Enhance our leadership and management development offer, and review our behaviour framework to support this.
- 9.2 Review our ways of working to ensure they recognise and reinforce behaviours that support our organisational culture and values.

Strategic objective 10: Continually develop and improve how we work, ensuring we are a well-run organisation that delivers the right outcomes and provides value for money

In 2023 to 2024, we agreed and launched our assurance framework. The framework helps us understand how well our systems of internal control are working and whether we're effective in assessing and managing risks. We'll continue to refine the framework during the year ahead as we learn from our work so far.

We've also agreed an approach to publishing information about our quality assurance arrangements and how these drive improvements in the quality and fairness of our decision making and the timeliness of our regulatory processes. We'll start to publish this information during 2024 to 2025.

In 2023 to 2024, we evaluated how well we're using public funds. This helped us to understand where we could be confident that we're providing value for money, and where we need to gather more evidence. Our work in this area will inform the independent review of Social Work England that will begin in 2024 to 2025.

After several years of regulation, our data and analysis shows that our back office functions are streamlined and efficient, and that we are achieving a good level of performance across most areas of our regulation. The changes we made to our rules and regulations have helped to maintain or improve quality of our decisions, whilst further streamlining processes so that we can resolve fitness to practise cases in a more timely way.

During 2024 to 2025, we'll continue to focus on how we can drive further efficiency improvements across our organisation and work with our sponsor, the Department for Education, to review our overall resourcing needs now and into the future, building the case for additional funding where necessary.

We started implementing our corporate sustainability plan during 2023. We've made good progress in reducing waste and increasing recycling. We set 3 year targets in March 2024 for improving our delivery against the Greening Government Commitments. We'll monitor our progress against these targets through 2024 to 2025 and beyond.

Key performance indicators

Key performance indicator	Target
Education quality assurance	
Percentage of course reapproval decisions made	100% by March 2025
Registration	
Time taken to approve UK registration applications	less than or equal to 10 working days (median)
Time taken to approve restoration applications	less than or equal to 20 working days (median)
Time taken to conclude misuse of title cases	less than or equal to 60 working days (median)
Time taken to answer emails	less than or equal to 5 working days (median)
Time taken to answer phone calls	less than or equal to 8 minutes (median)
Fitness to practise	
Age of triage caseload	less than or equal to 14 weeks (median)
Age of investigation caseload	less than or equal to 54 weeks (median)
Time taken to complete case examination process	less than or equal to 12 weeks (median)
Time taken from receipt of referral to final outcome	monitor (median weeks)
Time taken to approve interim orders	less than or equal to 20 working days (median)
Quality of fitness to practise cases	<i>removed¹</i>
Organisational	
Time taken to complete freedom of information requests	at least 90% within statutory deadline
Time taken to complete subject access requests	at least 90% within statutory deadline
Corporate complaints response time	at least 80% within 20 days
Retention rate	at least 80%
Days lost to sickness absence in last 12 months	Lower than public sector average (per person)
Forecast year-end variance to budget	+/- 1.5%
System availability excluding planned outages	at least 99%

¹ We previously monitored quality of fitness to practise cases through a quantitative indicator which looked at the quality of a sample of decisions made. This is just one element of a wider quality assurance framework. To provide a more holistic view of quality of fitness to practise cases in 2024 to 2025, we will instead provide a more detailed qualitative assessment in our quarterly performance reports.

Resources

Total revenue expenditure for 2024-25 is budgeted at £21.5 million, a decrease of £70,000 compared to 2023-24.

Our budget for fee income is £10.1 million, a decrease of £0.5 million compared to the 2023-24 budget. This change reflects the reduction in fee income received in 2023-24 compared to 2022-23, and is offset by a modest growth in the number of registered social workers.

Our capital expenditure allocation is £2.1 million, a decrease of £67,000 compared to 2023-24. The majority of this capital expenditure will support further development of our case management system to improve operational efficiency.

Our overall revenue budget comprises £11.9 million of salary costs and £9.7 million of non-pay costs. We have budgeted £2.3 million for depreciation and amortisation charges.

The majority of our revenue budget (70%) directly supports our strategic theme of regulate and protect, 11% supports prevention and impact, and 19% supports delivery and improvement.

Revenue budget for 2024-25 by strategic theme

