

Social worker: Peter Okunja

Registration number: SW89757

Fitness to Practise

Final Order Review Hearing

Date of hearing: 11 February 2026

Hearing venue: Remote

Final order being reviewed:
Suspension order (expiring 25 March 2026)

Hearing outcome:
Extend the current suspension order for a further 12 months with effect from the expiry of the current order

Introduction and attendees:

1. This is the first review of a final suspension order originally imposed for a period of 12 months by a panel of adjudicators on 26 February 2025.
2. Mr Okunja did not attend and was not represented.
3. Social Work England was represented by Ms Narayani Panesar-Stringer, case presenter from Social Work England, accompanied by Ms Louisa Atkin of Capsticks LLP.
4. The panel of adjudicators conducting this review (hereafter “the panel”) and the other people involved in it were as follows:

Adjudicators	Role
Andrew Skelton	Chair
Marva Kelly	Social worker adjudicator

Hearings team/Legal adviser	Role
Hannah Granger	Hearings officer
Ruby Wade	Hearings support officer
Diarmuid Bunting	Legal adviser

Service of notice:

5. The panel was informed by Ms Panesar-Stringer that notice of this hearing was sent to Mr Okunja by email to an address provided by Mr Okunja. Ms Panesar-Stringer submitted that the notice of this hearing had been duly served.
6. The panel of adjudicators had careful regard to the documents contained in the final order review service bundle as follows:
 - A copy of the notice of the final order review hearing dated 13 January 2026 and addressed to Mr Okunja at their email address which they provided to Social Work England;
 - An extract from the Social Work England Register as of 13 January 2026 detailing Mr Okunja’s registered address and email address;
 - A copy of a signed statement of service, on behalf of Social Work England, confirming that on 13 January 2026 the writer sent by email to Mr Okunja at the address referred to above: notice of hearing and related documents.
7. The panel accepted the advice of the legal adviser in relation to service of notice.
8. Having had regard to Rules 16, 44 and 45 of Social Work England’s Fitness to Practise Rules 2019 (as amended) (the “FTP Rules 2019”) and all of the information before it in relation to the service of notice, the panel was satisfied that notice of this hearing had been served on Mr Okunja in accordance with the Rules.

Preliminary matters:

9. The panel heard (in private) an application by Ms Panesar-Stringer on behalf of Social Work England that any parts of the hearing in which matters relating to Mr Okunja's health were discussed be held in private.
10. The panel's considerations included the circumstances of the case before it, Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the fact that the default position was that the principle of open justice should prevail, that professional conduct proceedings would generally be held in public and the guidance in *Miller v General Medical Council* [2013] EWHC 1934 (Admin).
11. However, this was not an application to hold the entire hearing in public, and there were substantial parts of the relevant material which did not appear to relate to health. It determined that it could adequately manage the hearing by going into private session if/when health-related matters were discussed.
12. The panel held that some of the hearing should be held in private, but only when the physical or mental health of the registered social worker was being discussed, pursuant to rule 38(a)(ii).
13. Therefore, Social Work England's application was granted.

Proceeding in the absence of the social worker:

14. The panel heard the submissions of Ms Panesar-Stringer on behalf of Social Work England. The panel was invited to proceed in the interests of justice and the expeditious disposal of this hearing.
15. The panel accepted the advice of the legal adviser in relation to the factors it should take into account when considering this application. This included reference to Rules 32 and 43 of the Rules and the cases of *R v Jones* [2002] UKHL 5; *General Medical Council v Adeogba* [2016] EWCA Civ 162. The panel also took into account Social Work England guidance 'Service of notices and proceeding in the absence of the social worker' and the Social Work England 'Guidelines on postponements and adjournments of fitness to practise hearings', both of which were last updated on 16 December 2022.
16. The panel had sight of correspondence between Social Work England and Mr Okunja in late October 2025 in which he confirmed [PRIVATE] and he had not undertaken 'the tasks'. The latter was evidently a reference to the recommendations which Social Work England had sent to Mr Okunja in relation to what evidence might assist a future reviewing panel of Social Work England's adjudicators.
17. Mr Okunja's position was therefore that he had been unwell and that, [PRIVATE] he had not undertaken relevant training in relation to confidentiality, created a reflective

document, gathered testimonials from colleagues and/or made efforts to engage with professional networks, mentorship etc.

18. The panel observed that notice of this hearing had been duly served, no application for an adjournment had been made by Mr Okunja and as such there was no guarantee that adjourning today's proceedings would secure their attendance. The panel considered that there were public protection concerns arising from the allegations. The panel was conscious that an adjournment could result in the current order lapsing and this weighed in favour of proceeding with the review hearing.
19. The panel considered all of the information before it, together with the submissions made by Ms Panesar-Stringer on behalf of Social Work England. The panel considered an email from Mr Okunja to Social Work England on 17 January 2026, which appeared to be in response to the email from Social Work England attaching the notice of hearing and inviting Mr Okunja to confirm whether he wished to attend. Mr Okunja's email suggested as follows:

“Many thanks for your email. As stated before, [PRIVATE]. Unfortunately, I not be able to respond as requested and will accept any outcome that will be reached.”
20. The panel noted that Mr Okunja had been sent notice of today's hearing. The panel was satisfied that Mr Okunja was (1) aware of today's hearing and (2) content for it to proceed in their absence.
21. The panel, therefore, concluded that Mr Okunja had chosen voluntarily to absent themselves, [PRIVATE]. The panel had no reason to believe that an adjournment would result in Mr Okunja's attendance. Having weighed the interests of Mr Okunja in regard to their attendance at the hearing with those of Social Work England and the public interest in an expeditious disposal of this hearing, the panel determined to proceed.
22. Thus, in the circumstances, the panel concluded that it was appropriate to proceed in the absence of Mr Okunja.

Review of the current order:

23. This final order review hearing is taking place under Paragraph 15(1) of Schedule 2 of The Social Workers Regulations 2018 (as amended) and Social Work England's Fitness to Practise Rules 2019 (as amended).
24. The purpose of this review is to review the current order, which is due to expire on 25 March 2026. The order subject to review is a suspension order.
25. The panel understood that the various options before it were as follows, pursuant to Schedule 2 of the Social Workers Regulations 2018:

- a. Under paragraph 15(1)(a): extend the period for which the previous order is in place (provided that any extension does not exceed 3 years at a time);
- b. Under paragraph 15(1)(b): make an order that the case examiners or adjudicators could have made at the time (provided that the order does not exceed 3 years at a time);
 - i. This includes, under paragraph 12(1), where there is no finding of impairment:
 - 1. warning;
 - 2. advice;
 - 3. no further action;
 - ii. This includes, under paragraphs 12(3) and 13(1), where there is a finding of impairment:
 - 1. removal order;
 - 2. suspension (not exceeding three years);
 - 3. conditions of practice (not exceeding three years);
 - 4. warning order;
 - 5. advice;
 - 6. no further action;
- c. Under paragraph 15(1)(c): replace a suspension order with a conditions of practice order;
- d. Under paragraph 15(1)(d): revoke the order in place.

The allegations found proved which resulted in the imposition of the final order were as follows:

26. The allegations found proven at the final hearing on 26 February 2025 were:

Whilst registered as a Social Worker and during the course of your employment with Merton Council, you:

1) Between 24 May 2019 and 1 June 2019 you sent Service User 1 inappropriate messages using your personal phone number.

2) On 20 May 2019 you sent confidential documents relating to Child K to your personal email address.

Your conduct at particulars 1-2 constitutes misconduct.

Your fitness to practice is impaired by reason of misconduct.

27. The panel at the final hearing on 26 February 2025 determined as follows in relation to misconduct:

Allegation 1

The first allegation, which concerns inappropriate communications by Mr Okunja with Service User 1, between 24 May 2019 and 1 June 2019, the panel concluded that the nature of these interactions constitutes misconduct. After finding the allegation proved, the panel considered the content and context of these communications, which reveal a significant breach of professional boundaries that are essential in the field of social work. The standards required of social workers, as articulated in the HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics, clearly state the necessity of maintaining professional boundaries and ensuring that relationships with service users are based on respect and honesty. Specifically, Standard 2.8 emphasizes that relationships should be founded on respect, while Standard 3.4 mandates the establishment and maintenance of personal and professional boundaries.

The messages sent by Mr Okunja to Service User 1 reveal a concerning attempt to develop a degree of personal intimacy, which is wholly inappropriate in a professional context. For instance, statements indicating a desire for emotional support from a vulnerable parent represent a significant breach of the expected professional roles. This lapse in professional judgment by Mr Okunja raises ethical questions about his ability to perform his duties effectively, as it compromises the integrity of the social worker-service user relationship.

The evidence presented indicates that Mr Okunja engaged in communications that were not only inappropriate but also indicative of a concerning degree of personal intimacy and emotional disclosure. For instance, a message dated 28 May 2019, in which Mr Okunja stated, “This is why I have to seek emotional support from none other than you,” demonstrates a troubling reversal of expected roles. In a social work context, it is imperative for professionals to maintain a clear boundary between their personal emotions and their service users’ needs. By seeking emotional support from a vulnerable parent, Mr Okunja compromised the integrity of the professional relationship, which constitutes misconduct.

Further, the messages sent on 31 May 2019, where Mr Okunja expressed a desire to “link up on Friday afternoon” and suggested, “Think of a place where we can be free,” indicate a shift from a focus on the welfare of Child K to pursuing an inappropriate personal connection with Service User 1. This pursuit not only undermines the professional focus required in social work but also

raises ethical concerns about Mr Okunja's judgment and intentions. Such actions clearly demonstrate misconduct.

The oral evidence provided by Ms E McQueen, Head of Service, significantly supports these findings. Her insights highlighted the dangers of crossing personal and professional boundaries, particularly when a social worker begins to disclose personal motivations and needs. Statements made by Mr Okunja, such as "Having some wine; it was meant for you but no response," further exemplify this inappropriate behaviour towards a vulnerable service user. Such comments not only breach professional standards but also erode the trust that is crucial in the social worker-service user relationship, thereby confirming that Mr Okunja's behaviour constitutes misconduct.

The timing of the messages is another factor that underscores the inappropriate nature of Mr Okunja's conduct. Sending messages late at night, for example, one at 23:39 PM, is not suitable for a professional social work service user relationship. Such informal non-professional communications raise significant concerns about Mr Okunja's judgment and professionalism. This blurs the necessary boundaries that should be maintained to prioritise the welfare of the service user and their family, reinforcing that his actions amount to misconduct.

Allegation 2

Regarding the second allegation, which pertains to the forwarding of confidential documents to his personal email address, the panel found that Mr Okunja's conduct constitutes misconduct. The HCPC Standards of Conduct, particularly Standard 10.3, highlight the imperative of maintaining confidentiality and securely handling sensitive information. Mr Okunja's decision to send confidential documents related to Child K to his personal email represents a clear violation of these standards and exposes sensitive information to potential risks.

The panel considered that in his explanation, he cited feeling pressure due to an audit of the case and mentioned that he did not have access to his work laptop at the time. While such circumstances may evoke sympathy, they do not mitigate Mr Okunja's responsibility to comply with established protocols designed to protect confidential information. The decision to send sensitive documents to a personal email address, which is inherently less secure, reflects a significant lapse in judgment and a failure to uphold the standards expected of a professional in this role.

The panel regarded Ms Eaton's oral evidence helpful in elucidating the context and implications of Mr Okunja's actions, highlighting the importance of adhering to confidentiality policies. The detailed nature of her evidence underscores that the policies in place are not mere formalities but essential safeguards intended to protect the interests of service users. Mr Okunja's actions not only

contravened these policies but also potentially exposed sensitive information to risks associated with unauthorised access.

The panel noted that the confidentiality policy established by the Council explicitly prohibits the transmission of personal identifiable information via unsecured email channels. This policy is not merely a formality but a critical safeguard designed to protect vulnerable individuals and uphold the integrity of social work practice. By failing to adhere to these guidelines, Mr Okunja not only contravened professional standards but also demonstrated a lack of regard for the ethical obligations inherent in his role as a social worker. The panel find misconduct of a serious nature.

The panel concluded that Mr Okunja's actions in allegation 2, therefore, represent a significant breach of this trust and warrant classification of misconduct.

The final hearing panel on 25 February 2025 determined the following with regard to impairment:

28. The panel at the final hearing on 26 February 2025 determined as follows in relation to impairment in fitness to practise:

Allegation 1

Turning to the issue of impairment regarding the first allegation, the panel assessed whether Mr Okunja's misconduct results in an impairment of his fitness to practice. The panel noted that in Cohen v General Medical Council, the evaluation of impairment must consider the protection of the public, the need to maintain confidence in the profession, and the upholding of proper standards of conduct. The panel finds that Mr Okunja's actions indicate a significant risk of recurrence, reflecting a fundamental misunderstanding of the professional boundaries that are critical in social work. However, the panel acknowledges that this misconduct is remediable if appropriate reflection, training and actions are undertaken.

In this context, the panel recalled the criteria set out in the Grant case, which states that at the impairment stage, the panel should take into account evidence that the conduct (i) is easily remediable, (ii) has already been remedied; and (iii) is highly unlikely to be repeated. The panel noted that Mr Okunja's behaviour demonstrates a lack of insight into the consequences of his actions. His willingness to engage in personal communications with a service user suggests a concerning disregard for the ethical standards expected of him. This lack of awareness raises doubts about his ability to safeguard the interests of vulnerable individuals in the future. Notwithstanding, applying the guidance in the Cohen case the panel took into account that there has been no previous

concerns raised about Mr Okunja's maintenance of boundaries in his ten year career. Consequently, the panel concluded that with proper training and a commitment to understanding, reflection on and adhering to professional boundaries, Mr Okunja can remediate his conduct effectively.

The panel concluded that the misconduct in allegation 1 resulted in current impairment of his fitness to practise.

Allegation 2

In assessing the impairment resulting from the second allegation, the panel evaluates the potential risks associated with Mr Okunja's actions. The assessment of impairment must take into account the need to protect the public and maintain confidence in the profession. The panel finds that forwarding confidential documents to a personal email account reflects a serious lapse in judgment, indicating a potential for future breaches of confidentiality. Mr Okunja has not yet remediated this aspect of his practice. The panel believes that it remains remediable through targeted training, reflection and a commitment to understanding confidentiality protocols, in line with the guidance from the Grant case regarding the importance of remediation in preserving public trust.

Moreover, the panel noted that Mr Okunja acknowledged his actions but attributed them to external pressures, suggesting a lack of personal responsibility for adhering to established protocols. This response raises concerns about his understanding of the importance of confidentiality and the ethical obligations of a social worker. The panel however applying the approach in the Cohen case concluded that with appropriate training, reflection, and a demonstration of accountability, Mr Okunja has the potential to remediate his conduct effectively.

The panel concluded that the misconduct in allegation 2 results in current impairment of his fitness to practise.

The panel was satisfied that a finding of current impaired fitness to practise was necessary to protect the public.

Further, as regards to the public impairment element, the panel considered that reasonable, well informed, members of the public would be shocked about Mr Okunja's inappropriate conduct.

Given that Mr Okunja's misconduct relates to breaches of fundamental tenets of social work, the panel was satisfied that professional standards would not be promoted and maintained by a finding that Mr Okunja's fitness to practise is not currently impaired, particularly considering the panel's assessment of him demonstrating limited insight and there being presently an absence of remediation.

The panel therefore concluded that, because of Mr Okunja's misconduct, a finding of current impairment of fitness to practise was necessary to protect the public, promote and maintain public confidence in the social work profession and declare and uphold proper professional standards of conduct and behaviour.

In addition the panel carefully analysed the character references provided by Mr Okunja. The panel concluded that these references had a narrow focus and did not demonstrate awareness and understanding of Allegation 1. The panel took this into account in its decision making.

The final hearing panel on 25 February 2025 determined the following with regard to sanction:

29. The determination of the panel at the final hearing on 26 February 2025 included the following in relation to sanction:

The panel took account of both aggravating and mitigating factors. After careful analysis of all the evidence and information, the panel determined that a 12-month suspension order is warranted.

Turning to the aggravating factors, the panel noted that Mr Okunja had exhibited only an embryonic level of insight into the seriousness of his actions. This limited understanding is troubling, particularly in light of the breaches of professional standards. There was also a breach of trust, concerning the expectations placed upon an experienced social worker like Mr Okunja. Such a breach undermines the integrity of the profession and erodes public confidence in social work as a whole. Furthermore, the panel identified a lack of transparency in Mr Okunja's conduct, specifically noting that he deleted the text messages he sent to Service User One. This action raises concerns about his willingness to take responsibility for his behaviour and to maintain professional integrity. The panel also highlighted the ongoing risk of repetition, which further emphasises the need for a firm response to the breaches identified.

In terms of mitigating factors, the panel recognised that there was no previous regulatory history in Mr Okunja's 10 years career, and it was evident that he was capable of good, safe practice. Mr Okunja has made admissions at a local level, expressed remorse through an apology, and engaged in training aimed at addressing confidentiality concerns. Disappointingly the content of this training was absent. The panel finds that these efforts do not sufficiently address the nature of the allegations or demonstrate the necessary depth of insight into the implications of Mr Okunja's actions. His current insight into his conduct is a concern, especially given the actual harm experienced by Service User One and the risk of harm to Child K.

The panel considered ascending sanctions, their appropriateness and proportionality in this case.

...

[Suspension:] After careful consideration, the panel determined that a 12-month Suspension Order is the most appropriate and proportionate course of action. This sanction allows Mr Okunja time to engage in meaningful reflection, training, and personal development, which are crucial for addressing the concerns raised. In the panel's assessment this would protect the public, enable Mr Okunja to reflect on the steps he needs to take to improve his practice. In addition, this order satisfies the public interest in sending a clear message that misconduct of this type would attract a significant sanction. Given Mr Okunja's prolonged period abroad until September 2025 and the time that he will need to demonstrate significant reflection, training and remediation the panel consider that the period of 12 months is both necessary and proportionate.

...

The panel considers that by addressing these elements, Mr Okunja may demonstrate his commitment to remediate the concerns identified to ensure that he can practice safely and effectively in the future. The panel concluded that a suspension order, coupled with these steps, strikes the right balance between public safety, proportionality, and the social worker's opportunity for rehabilitation.

...

Social Work England submissions:

30. It was confirmed at the outset that all attendees had the 60-page bundle and the 12-page service and supplementary bundle.
31. The panel heard submissions from Ms Panesar-Stringer as to the background and the previous panel's findings in relation to impairment and sanction.
32. Capsticks had provided a written submission, which was sent to Mr Okunja within the notice of hearing dated 13 January 2026. It proposed, on behalf of Social Work England, a 12-month continuation of the suspension order, saying:

Social Work England invite the Panel to find that the Social Worker's fitness to practise remains impaired and to extend the Suspension Order for a further 12 months.

The Social Worker is currently subject to a Final Suspension Order which was imposed on 26 February 2025 after a Panel of Social Work England's Adjudicators found that (1) he had sent a service user inappropriate messages

using his personal phone number, and (2) he sent confidential documents relating to Child K to his personal email address.

As a result of that misconduct, the Panel found that the Social Worker's fitness to practise was impaired on the following basis:

(a) he demonstrated a lack of insight into the consequences of his actions.

(b) his willingness to engage in personal communication with a service user demonstrated raised concerns about his ability to safeguard the interests of vulnerable individuals in the future.

(c) he lacked personal responsibility for adhering to established protocols, thus raising concerns about his understanding of the importance of confidentiality and ethical obligations as a social worker.

The Panel considered that the Social Worker's conduct could be remediated with the appropriate training, reflection and a demonstration of accountability. The Social Worker has failed to provide any evidence that he has undertaken such work or is currently engaged with the process. In the absence of any evidence from the Social Worker that he has embarked on training and reflection, it is submitted that the Panel cannot be satisfied that he has fully remediated his actions.

The Social Worker has submitted some [PRIVATE]. [PRIVATE]. Although the Social Worker has contacted the Case Review Team he has not been able to provide any evidence of remediation or that the recommendations of the Final Hearing Panel have been followed.

As such, the Review Panel are invited to find that his Fitness to Practise remains impaired and to impose a further Final Suspension Order for a period of twelve months. Such an order will protect the public until the Social Worker can demonstrate insight and remediation.

33. Since then, and apparently in response to the correspondence containing the above submissions, Mr Okunja emailed Social Work England on 17 January 2026 to confirm he was '[PRIVATE]', that he was 'not be able to respond as requested' and that he would 'accept any outcome that will be reached'.
34. Social Work England's position remained that it advocated for a 12-month continuation of the suspension order.
35. Ms Panesar-Stringer's oral submissions broadly reflected Social Work England's position as detailed in the notice of hearing, with some elaboration upon the facts and the applicable law.

Social worker submissions:

36. Mr Okunja did not provide written or oral submissions for the review hearing.

Decision and reasons on current impairment:

37. The panel first considered whether Mr Okunja's fitness to practise remains impaired.

38. In considering the question of current impairment, the panel undertook a comprehensive review of the final order in light of the current circumstances. It took into account the decision of the previous panel. However, it has exercised its own judgement in relation to the question of current impairment. The panel also took into account Social Work England's 'Impairment and sanctions guidance'.

39. The panel had regard to all of the documentation before it, including the decision and reasons of the original panel. The panel also took account of the submissions made by Ms Panesar-Stringer on behalf of Social Work England. There were no new submissions or documentation provided by Mr Okunja.

40. The panel heard and accepted the advice of the legal adviser on the issue of impairment in fitness to practise.

41. The matters the panel took into consideration included:

- a. The panel's powers under paragraph 15(1) of Schedule 2 of the Social Workers Regulations 2018;
- b. The relevance of Social Work England's Professional Standards, as referred to in paragraph 6 of Social Work England's 'Impairment and sanctions guidance';
- c. *Cohen v GMC* [2008] EWHC 581 (Admin), including as reflected in paragraph 12 of Social Work England's 'Impairment and sanctions guidance', which relates to the private element of fitness to practise, including whether the impugned conduct (1) is easily remediable, (2) has been remedied and (3) is highly unlikely to be repeated;
- d. Paragraphs 213 to 218 of Social Work England's 'Impairment and sanctions guidance', which relate to mandatory reviews of final orders and the fact that the panel must consider whether:
 - i. The social worker has demonstrated remediation, insight and/or remorse
 - ii. The social worker has demonstrated they are now safe to practise and/or there is no longer a risk to the public
 - iii. The social worker has taken steps to maintain their skills and knowledge

- iv. The social worker's fitness to practise remains impaired (and if so, whether the existing order or another order needs to be in place); and
 - v. The social worker has sufficiently addressed the concerns raised in the original finding of impairment.
- e. Paragraph 16 to 59 of Social Work England's 'Impairment and sanctions guidance', which relate to which relate to the following non-exhaustive list of matters which should be considered when determining personal impairment:
- i. harm caused (or risk of harm);
 - ii. repetition (or risk of repetition);
 - iii. previous history;
 - iv. insight – which is an important issue and is addressed at paragraphs 31 to 36 of the guidance;
 - v. remediation;
 - vi. admissions of alleged facts;
 - vii. testimonials.
- f. Paragraph 60 to 62 of Social Work England's 'Impairment and sanctions guidance', which relate to the public elements of assessing impairment in fitness to practise and include reference to consideration whether a failure to make a finding of impairment may do one or more of the following:
- i. Undermine public confidence in the profession; and/or
 - ii. Fail to maintain the professional standards expected of social workers.

42. In reaching its decision, the panel was mindful of the need to protect the public and the wider public interest in declaring and upholding proper standards of behaviour and maintain public confidence in the profession.

43. The panel was aware that the issue of impairment was a matter for the panel's own judgment. However, it largely agreed with the rationale of the panel which imposed the final order on 25 February 2025.

44. The panel considered that the conduct which formed the basis of the regulatory concerns was not easily remediable, but it was remediable with training and reflection. It took the view that Mr Okunja had not yet demonstrated that the concerns had been meaningfully remediated, including due to a lack of clear insight and/or recognition of personal responsibility on the part of the social worker. The panel was also concerned

that due to the nature of the conduct and the lack of insight, there was a risk of repetition such that the panel could not conclude that it was highly unlikely that the conduct would be repeated.

45. For these reasons, the panel held that Mr Okunja's fitness to practise remained impaired by reason of the personal element of fitness to practice.
46. In relation to the public element of impairment, the panel considered that reasonable, well informed, members of the public would be shocked about Mr Okunja's conduct.
47. The relevant misconduct related to breaches of fundamental tenets of social work and the panel was satisfied that professional standards would not be promoted and maintained by a finding that Mr Okunja's fitness to practise is not currently impaired, particularly considering the panel's assessment of him demonstrating limited insight and there being presently an absence of remediation.
48. The panel therefore concluded that, because of Mr Okunja's misconduct (seen in the context of the present circumstances), a finding of current impairment of fitness to practise was necessary to protect the public, promote and maintain public confidence in the social work profession and declare and uphold proper professional standards of conduct and behaviour.

Decision and reasons on sanction:

49. Having found Mr Okunja's fitness to practise is currently impaired, the panel then considered what, if any, sanction it should impose in this case. The following orders were open to the panel:
 - a. revocation of the current order (with immediate effect);
 - b. no further action (in which case the current order would lapse on 25 March 2026);
 - c. advice;
 - d. warning order;
 - e. conditions of practice (not exceeding three years);
 - f. suspension (not exceeding three years);
 - g. removal order.
50. The panel had regard to the submissions made along with all the information and accepted the advice of the legal adviser on the issue of sanction.
51. The panel considered the submissions made by Ms Panesar-Stringer, on behalf of Social Work England, during which they invited the panel to consider imposing a 12-month suspension order. It noted that it had no recent submissions by or on behalf of

Mr Okunja. The panel also took into account the ‘Impairment and sanctions guidance’ published by Social Work England.

52. The panel took into account – in relation to consideration of sanction – the following parts of the ‘Impairment and sanctions guidance’ published by Social Work England:

- a. Paragraphs 68 to 72, which outline general principles regarding sanction;
- b. Paragraph 73, which relates to the requirement that the sanction must be the minimum necessary to protect the public (including the wider public interest);
- c. Paragraphs 80, 81 and 82, which relate to mitigating and aggravating factors;
- d. Para 107 etc. re: warnings.
- e. Para 113 etc. (particularly paragraph 114) re: conditions
- f. Paragraphs 135 to 144 regarding suspension orders, including their duration.

53. The panel was mindful that the purpose of any sanction is not to punish Mr Okunja, but to protect the public and the wider public interest. The public interest includes maintaining public confidence in the profession and Social Work England as its regulator and by upholding proper standards of conduct and behaviour. The panel applied the principle of proportionality by weighing Mr Okunja’s interests with the public interest.

54. In making its decision the panel applied the guidance from Social Work England concerning impairment and the appropriate sanctions necessary for public protection and public interest, ensuring that any action taken is proportionate to the seriousness of the concerns raised.

55. The panel took account of both aggravating and mitigating factors, which are summarised in the previous panel’s decision of 25 February 2025, as quoted above under paragraph 25, and repeated below for ease of reference.

Turning to the aggravating factors, the panel noted that Mr Okunja had exhibited only an embryonic level of insight into the seriousness of his actions. This limited understanding is troubling, particularly in light of the breaches of professional standards. There was also a breach of trust, concerning the expectations placed upon an experienced social worker like Mr Okunja. Such a breach undermines the integrity of the profession and erodes public confidence in social work as a whole. Furthermore, the panel identified a lack of transparency in Mr Okunja’s conduct, specifically noting that he deleted the text messages he sent to Service User One. This action raises concerns about his willingness to take responsibility for his behaviour and to maintain professional integrity. The panel also

highlighted the ongoing risk of repetition, which further emphasises the need for a firm response to the breaches identified.

In terms of mitigating factors, the panel recognised that there was no previous regulatory history in Mr Okunja's 10 years career, and it was evident that he was capable of good, safe practice. Mr Okunja has made admissions at a local level, expressed remorse through an apology, and engaged in training aimed at addressing confidentiality concerns. Disappointingly the content of this training was absent. The panel finds that these efforts do not sufficiently address the nature of the allegations or demonstrate the necessary depth of insight into the implications of Mr Okunja's actions. His current insight into his conduct is a concern, especially given the actual harm experienced by Service User One and the risk of harm to Child K.

56. After its analysis of all the evidence and information, the panel ultimately determined that a 12-month suspension order is warranted.
57. Before reaching this conclusion, the panel considered ascending sanctions, their appropriateness and proportionality in this case, as summarised below.
58. **No Further Action or Revocation of the Current Order:** This was deemed inappropriate as it would fail to address the nature and/or seriousness of the breaches and would not provide adequate public protection, given the risks identified. It would leave Mr Okunja in unrestricted practice. It would also fail to adequately protect the broader public interest considerations of protecting the profession and maintaining professional standards.
59. **Advice:** This option was deemed inappropriate as it would fail to address the nature and/or seriousness of the breaches and would not provide adequate public protection, given the risks identified. It would leave Mr Okunja in unrestricted practice. It would also fail to adequately protect the broader public interest considerations of protecting the profession and maintaining professional standards.
60. **Warning Order:** The panel concluded that it would not address the underlying concerns of insight and accountability. It would be disproportionately lenient in the circumstances. A warning would not facilitate the necessary reflection and remediation required in this case. Therefore it would not adequately protect the public. It would also fail to adequately protect the broader public interest considerations of protecting the profession and maintaining professional standards.
61. **Conditions of Practice Order:** This sanction could be suitable where a social worker demonstrates insight and can comply with specific conditions, the panel found that Mr Okunja has not shown sufficient understanding of the implications of his actions. Nor has he demonstrated sufficient insight or undertaken training. Additionally, conditions were not appropriate in this case as they would be unlikely to adequately protect the public or the profession. Also, given his current and prolonged absence from social work, the panel did not consider that appropriate, proportionate and workable

conditions could be put in place in any event. Therefore, the panel concluded that a conditions of practice order is not appropriate or proportionate at this time.

62. **Suspension:** The panel determined that a 12-month Suspension Order is the most appropriate and proportionate course of action. This sanction may allow Mr Okunja time to engage in meaningful reflection, training, and personal development, [PRIVATE], which are crucial for addressing the concerns raised. In the panel's assessment, a further 12-month period of suspension would protect the public and enable Mr Okunja to reflect on the steps he needs to take to improve his practice. In addition, this order satisfies the public interest in sending a clear message that misconduct of this type should attract a significant sanction. Given Mr Okunja's [PRIVATE] and the time that he will need to demonstrate significant reflection, training and remediation the panel consider that the period of 12 months is both necessary and proportionate.
63. **Removal Order:** The panel noted that a removal order is a sanction of last resort where there is no other means of protecting the public or the wider public interest. The panel concluded that a removal order would not be appropriate in this case for several reasons. While Mr Okunja's conduct represents breaches of professional standards, he has engaged with the proceedings to some extent, demonstrating a potential willingness to acknowledge and address his actions. A removal order would effectively terminate his ability to practice as a social worker, which would be a disproportionate response given that the panel believes there remains potential for rehabilitation and improvement.

Extend the current suspension order for a further 12 months with effect from the expiry of the current order:

64. The panel determined that the suspension order should be extended for a period of 12 months. The panel was satisfied that this period was appropriate because this would adequately protect the public and the wider public interest.
65. The suspension period might, [PRIVATE], also enable Mr Okunja to reflect on the panel's findings and devise a plan of action targeted towards an unrestricted return to the register, if they desire such a return.
66. This panel cannot bind a future panel. However, a future reviewing panel might expect Mr Okunja to attend the review hearing and it would be of assistance to that panel if they were able to provide evidence that they had undertaken significant steps that would facilitate a safe and effective return to the register without restriction. This may include – as suggested by the panel who issued the final order on 26 February 2025 and as reiterated by the present final order review panel on 11 February 2026 – the following:
- Mr Okunja's attendance at the review hearing.

- **Evidence of Completed Training:** Mr Okunja should complete relevant training focused on confidentiality including handling sensitive information, professional boundaries, and ethical practice. Certificates of completion or attendance at workshops should be submitted and learning outcomes identified.
- **Reflective Practice Documentation:** Preferably using a recognised reflective tool, such as Gibbs, Mr Okunja should provide a written detailed reflective piece focusing on the issues identified in his misconduct. This reflection should include how his practice impacted on Service User 1 and the potential risk to Child K; how he will take steps to prevent any repetition in his future practice. This could include reference to the impact of any training he undertakes.
- **Testimonials from Colleagues:** Mr Okunja may gather new testimonials from any third parties concerning any work he undertakes whether paid or unpaid.
- **Engagement Evidence:** Documentation showing any efforts to engage with professional networks, mentorship, or other forms of professional development during the suspension period.

67. Social Work England’s ‘Guidance for suspended social workers’ may provide assistance to Mr Okunja, in terms of where to focus their efforts. The panel has included below, as an appendix, some potentially helpful extracts from that Guidance.

Right of appeal:

68. Under Paragraph 16(1)(b) of Schedule 2 of The Social Workers Regulations 2018 (as amended), the social worker may appeal to the High Court against:

- a. the decision of adjudicators:
 - i. to make an interim order, other than an interim order made at the same time as a final order under paragraph 11(1)(b),
 - ii. not to revoke or vary such an order,
 - iii. to make a final order,
- b. the decision of the regulator on review of an interim order, or a final order, other than a decision to revoke the order.

69. Under Paragraph 16(2) of Schedule 2 of The Social Workers Regulations 2018 (as amended) an appeal must be filed before the end of the period of 28 days beginning with the day after the day on which the social worker is notified of the decision complained of.

70. Under Paragraph 15(1A) of Schedule 2 of The Social Workers Regulations 2018 (as amended), where a social worker appeals against a decision made under sub-

paragraph (1), the decision being appealed takes effect from the date specified in that sub-paragraph notwithstanding any appeal against that decision.

71. This notice is served in accordance with Rules 44 and 45 of the Fitness to Practise Rules 2019 (as amended).

Review of final orders:

72. Under regulation 15(1), 15(2) and 15(3) of Schedule 2 of The Social Workers Regulations 2018 (as amended):

- 15(1) The regulator must review a suspension order, or a conditions of practice order, before its expiry.
- 15(2) The regulator may review a final order where new evidence relevant to the order has become available after the making of the order, or when requested to do so by the social worker.
- 15(3) A request by the social worker under sub-paragraph (2) must be made within such period as the regulator determines in rules made under Regulation 25(5).

73. Under Rule 16(aa) of the Fitness to Practise Rules 2019 (as amended), a social worker requesting a review of a final order under paragraph 15 of Schedule 2 must make the request within 28 days of the day on which they are notified of the order.

The Professional Standards Authority

74. Please note that in accordance with section 29 of the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002, a review decision made by Social Work England's panel of adjudicators can be referred by the Professional Standards Authority ("the PSA") to the High Court. The PSA can refer this decision to the High Court if it considers that the decision is not sufficient for the protection of the public. Further information about PSA appeals can be found on their website at:

<https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work-with-regulators/decisions-about-practitioners>

Appendix:
Extracts from ‘Guidance for suspended social workers’
(16 December 2022)

What can you do while you're suspended?

There are number of activities that may be recommended while you’re suspended. Even if our decision makers have not recommended any of the activities below, it may still be helpful to do some or all of them (depending on the issues relevant to your case).

Reflective writing to show insight

One of the most important factors in assessing impairment is insight. Insight means having an understanding of (all of the following):

- what happened
- why it happened
- the risks to service users (either potential harm or actual harm)
- the impact on the service user, colleagues
- the impact on the reputation of social work
- how it could and should have been avoided

The best way to demonstrate insight is with reflective writing.

...

How to write a reflective writing piece

A good starting point is to thoroughly read the decision given to you by the decision maker so you can understand what their concerns and considerations were. Then, review the [professional standards](#).

When you’re writing, some useful questions you may wish to focus on are (all or any or the following):

- where did your conduct fall short of what was expected of you as a social worker?

- why did it fall short?
- what were the risks to service users?
- what should you have done?
- what will you do differently in the future?
- how do you feel about your conduct on reflection?
- what was the impact or potential impact on the service user, any colleagues or the reputation of social work as a whole?

You may be able to ask for help from colleagues or other social workers if you're struggling with this. Sometimes a different perspective can be really helpful.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

What is CPD?

CPD is an essential reflection and learning activity.

You do CPD throughout your social work career to maintain and improve your practice. CPD is standard 4 of Social Work England's 6 professional standards which set out what you must know, understand and be able to do.

Why undertake CPD?

Evidencing CPD is an essential part of demonstrating your fitness to practice.

If there was a particular practice issue relevant to your case, or maybe several, you could focus on undertaking relevant CPD to try to update your knowledge and skill in that particular area.

For example, if the issue in question was that you were offensive to a service user, you might want to consider CPD around communication. CPD can be a whole range of different activities including (but not limited to the following):

- reading
- attending seminars or lectures
- online or face-to-face courses

You should then reflect on your CPD and consider:

- how it will affect your practice in the future
- what you will now do differently

We recommend you keep a log of your CPD activity including evidence of attendance at seminars, lectures or courses and notes of your reflections. You can then submit this evidence for your review.

You may need to inform some course providers that you are currently suspended. If you're not sure, it is better to disclose your suspension to be on the safe side.

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Testimonials or references

Testimonials or references from people who know you can be helpful for demonstrating your current fitness to practise at a review hearing or meeting. They can be written by (any of the following):

- your employer
- previous employers
- other social workers you have previously worked with

If you've taken up non-social work employment or voluntary work during your suspension, testimonials from your new employer or work colleagues may still be helpful providing they are relevant to the fitness to practise concerns. For example, if the fitness to practise concerns related to issues with professionalism, communication and record keeping, a testimonial from a new employer talking about how you have demonstrated good communication, professionalism and administration skills in your new or voluntary role could be helpful.

Testimonials must be signed and dated by the author and ideally on headed paper where appropriate. The author should explain what their relationship is to you. A

testimonial or reference will hold more weight with a decision maker where it is clear the author was aware of the fitness to practise concerns.

Retraining or further training

You may want to use the period of your suspension to carry out some retraining on a specific area of social work or carry out advanced courses. Provided the course is relevant to the fitness to practise concerns, this may be helpful evidence of remediation.

Be aware that you're likely to have to disclose your suspension to course providers or higher education institutions. They may decide (under their own processes) that they're unable to offer you a place at that time.

You must always be honest about your suspension to those that ask about it. Even if people do not directly ask, it might still be relevant for you to tell them about it.