

BY E-MAIL

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

17 March 2025

Dear Secretary of State,

Fitness to practise delays at Social Work England

On Friday 21 March, we will publish our review of the performance of Social Work England in the year 2023/24. We are concerned about delays in Social Work England's fitness to practise process and I am writing to you on behalf of the PSA's Board to inform you of the action we are taking. I attach a copy of our report.

As you know, the PSA reports to Parliament each year on the performance of the 10 statutory regulators of health and social care professionals.¹ We judge a regulator's performance against our 18 [Standards of Good Regulation](#), which cover the four key regulatory functions of guidance and standards, education and training, registration and fitness to practise. Each Standard is assessed as being 'met' or 'not met'.

Social Work England has not met our Standard for fitness to practise timeliness since 2020/21. This is due to ongoing concerns about the time Social Work England is taking to process its fitness to practise cases. The median time taken from Social Work England receiving referrals, to those cases being closed at the hearing stage, has been consistently increasing. As of September 2024, the median time was 184 weeks.

In 2024, Social Work England concluded 40 final hearings. At the end of 2024, it had 421 open cases awaiting a hearing. In the same period, Social Work England progressed 112 new cases into its pool of cases awaiting a hearing, 72 more than the number of hearings it held. There are factors which cause the number of hearings to fluctuate, but it appears

¹ These are the General Chiropractic Council, the General Dental Council, the General Medical Council, the General Optical Council, the General Osteopathic Council, the General Pharmaceutical Council, the Health and Care Professions Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland and Social Work England.

clear that Social Work England will need to significantly increase the number of final hearings to start reducing its backlog at the hearings stage.

Alongside the significant backlog at the hearings stage, the other stages of the fitness to practise process continue to take too long and show limited signs of improvement. The time taken at each stage of the fitness to practise process is comparable to the worst performing regulators in this area. There is evidence that timeliness at the earlier stages of the process could be stabilising, but it is too early to tell.

Social Work England has been taking steps to improve its processes and learn from the delays, and this is reassuring. We also note that Social Work England has recently begun consulting on increasing its fees, which should enable it to devote more resources to fitness to practise. We are not concerned that Social Work England is not taking these issues seriously. However, it has not yet been able to improve its performance in this area.

Fitness to practise delays are an area of significant concern for stakeholders. Every stakeholder that we met with for our 2023/24 performance review, and most stakeholders that provided us with written feedback, raised their concerns about this issue. For registrants, fitness to practise delays can have a significant impact on their wellbeing and cause financial hardship. For people raising concerns with Social Work England, these delays can mean they are waiting years for a resolution to their concern, which can be particularly difficult where the alleged conduct has had a significant impact on their life.

We will be closely monitoring Social Work England's work to improve its fitness to practise performance, so that we can understand its progress and raise concerns if its work does not appear to be effective. We will also continue to engage with Social Work England and other stakeholders to understand whether its performance is improving. We will report to you on progress until our concerns are resolved.

Yours sincerely,



Caroline Corby
Chair

Copy to:

Helen Hayes MP, Chair of the Education Select Committee
Dr Andrew McCulloch, Chair, Social Work England
Colum Conway, Chief Executive and Registrar, Social Work England