REGISTRATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Consultation Summary Report

May 2001

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1. Introduction

The Minister of Social Services and Employment, Steve Maharey, is committed to establishing a system for the registration of social workers in New Zealand. In late July 2000 the Ministry of Social Policy distributed the *Registration for Social Workers Discussion Paper*. The social work sector was asked to make submissions on the discussion paper by 15 September 2000. In addition, during August and September 2000 the Ministry of Social Policy held focus group meetings around the country to discuss social work registration. In total, 315 written submissions were received in response to the discussion paper, and around 380 people attended the focus group meetings. Appendix 1 notes the locations, dates and approximate numbers attending the various meetings.

The purpose of this report is to summarise the views received through the consultation process. The report is structured around the questions that were asked in the discussion paper. For each question, responses are grouped in four sections:

- written responses to the discussion paper
- feedback from the general focus group meetings, which were largely attended by Pakeha social workers
- feedback from the hui, attended by Maori social workers
- feedback from the fono for Pacific social workers.

If the recordings of the meetings/hui/fono did not cover an issue or did not add any further points, either in favour of or in opposition to the points covered in the written submissions, no comment has been made.

The last section of the report briefly summarises the next steps for this project, including how the consultation has contributed to policy decisions.

2.   Demographic information

The first section of the Quick Guide to Questions in the discussion paper collected demographic information about the respondents. The following list provides a picture of the 315 people and groups who responded to the discussion paper:

- gender   80% were female
- age   61% were aged over 45 years, 24% were 35–44 years, and 15% were 25–34 years

- ethnicity   69% identified themselves as New Zealand European, 21% as Maori, 2% as Pacific Island and 7% as 'other' ethnicity
- education   80% had an academic qualification
- employment status   32% were social workers employed by a non-government organisation; 21% were non-statutory social workers employed by government; 13% were social workers without direct client contact (for example social work educator, manager, trainer, supervisor); 11% were statutory social workers employed by government; 7% were social work students; and 3% were private-paid social work practitioners.

The views of around 120 organisations were represented in the written responses.

Demographic information was not collected from the participants who attended the focus group meetings.

3. Questions

Question 1   Should there be a registration system for social workers in New Zealand?

Written responses

All respondents were in favour of registration for social workers. The three most common reasons for support were that registration would:

- set and maintain high levels of professionalism and minimum standards of practice
- result in increased safety and protection for all stakeholders (including clients and social workers)
- provide a formal mechanism for accountability for the social work profession.

Relatively few submissions expressed reservations or concerns about the principle of registration. The main concern was that registration might exclude competent practitioners who are currently working, but may not be eligible to be registered (for example, youth and community workers, those without qualifications, and volunteers). There was also concern that registration might devalue existing Maori social work practices. A small minority of respondents considered that registration should be expanded to cover all social service workers.

General meetings

Overall there was agreement from participants that some form of registration for social workers is needed. A number of benefits were identified, including protection for social workers and clients, accountability, and establishing a benchmark for employers.

However, it was questioned whether registration could in fact deliver all of these benefits. Participants particularly raised doubts about the ability of registration on its own to ensure safe practice, and noted that work environments are equally important in ensuring that safe practice occurs. If social workers are unsupported, inadequately supervised and overworked, then individual competency on its own may not assure safe practice. There was also hesitancy about the form that registration might take. Participants were concerned that the registration system may be too costly, too onerous, or may create barriers for people who are good social workers but who are not able to attain the required qualifications.

Hui

Overall there was support for a registration process. Participants thought that registration could improve the quality of social work practice and give professional recognition. One of the hui arrived at a more cautious conclusion. Participants here were concerned that registration may create an obstacle for Maori social service organisations, and that it may marginalise social workers.

Fono

Again there was agreement in principle to registration. Some participants were concerned that social workers trained in the Islands may not be eligible for registration when they come to New Zealand, even though they would be highly acceptable to the Pacific community and to clients.

Fono participants discussed the need to consider the impact that registration of social workers in New Zealand could have on the rest of the Pacific. There are many diverse groups in the Pacific and they often look to New Zealand as an example. A question was asked about how people in the Pacific Islands can have a voice in this process.

Question 2   Which type of registration would best meet the goal of ensuring safe practice in the social work occupation?

Written responses

Certification was the most favoured system of registration. Two-thirds of respondents supported certification, 28% supported licensing the social work occupation, and 6% favoured licensing specific tasks.

Respondents who favoured certification considered that it would provide assurance of high-quality social work practice. It would also allow flexibility in terms of whether social workers became registered, and whether employers chose to employ registered or unregistered social workers.

The most common reason for supporting licensing was that it would provide maximum protection for both social workers and their clients. Other reasons were that licensing would provide enhanced status for the social work profession, and that it would enhance accountability by providing a standard disciplinary process.

General meetings

There was a general consensus that a 'one-size' registration system would not fit all social workers. Some participants considered that all social workers should be registered (licensing the occupation), while others favoured a tiered system where social workers employed by the government would be required to meet higher standards than social workers employed by community organisations (certification with a compulsory element).

Hui

Many of the hui promoted the idea of a multi-tiered registration system, like the model used for comprehensive and registered nurses. The idea of registering an organisation rather than an individual was also explored at one hui. Several hui were anxious that the registration process should not become a barrier for existing and potential expert practitioners to work. These hui advocated for a more open registration system.

Questions 3   Are there certain tasks that only registered social workers should do?

Written responses

Most respondents agreed that certain clearly defined tasks could be restricted to registered social workers. The most commonly mentioned of these tasks were statutory social work tasks, work in specialised high-risk practice areas, work in care and protection, and working with particularly vulnerable client groups.

A number of specific comments were received in response to this question, as follows.

- The ability of social workers to undertake specialised tasks needs to be acknowledged and recognised, and social workers with these specialist skills should have these skills listed in their registry details.
- Tasks that a registered social worker is able to undertake should depend on their level of qualification and number of practice hours.
- There is a need for a clear definition of social work and social work tasks that only registered social workers should perform.

General meetings

There was some agreement that registration could be based around risk. However, it was acknowledged that this would be difficult to administer as social workers perform high-risk tasks in many different settings (for example, Child, Youth and Family when uplifting children, Women's Refuge workers supporting women leaving their homes, and Youthline volunteers counselling suicidal clients).

Question 4   Should registration be compulsory for particular categories of social workers?

Written responses

Respondents were asked to tick a box to indicate whether registration should be compulsory or voluntary for social workers in different types of employment. The percentages of those who favoured compulsory registration responses were as follows:

- statutory government social workers   100%
- non-statutory government social workers   85%
- social workers employed by non-government organisations that   100% receive government funding
- social workers employed by non-government organisations that   70% are privately funded
- private-paid practitioners   over 75%
- volunteer unpaid social workers   less than 40%
- social workers without direct client supervision   58%
- social work students on placement.   20%

Hui

Participants at the hui noted the need to take into account the fact that social work jobs differ enormously, so the required competencies should not be the same for all social workers. This raised some support for a tiered framework of registration.

Fono

Questions were raised about the place of Pacific elders, volunteers and community workers in a registration system for social workers.

Question 5   What type of functions should the Registration Board have?

Written responses

The discussion paper listed a range of functions that could be performed by the Registration Board. The percentages of those who agreed to the specific functions were as follows:

- certify or license individuals as registered social workers   96%
- maintain a register of all social workers; investigate complaints,   100%
  conduct disciplinary hearings and impose sanctions, including de-
  registration
- re-certify or re-license social workers   94%
- set and enforce codes of conduct and standards of practice   93%
- set the entry criteria   91%
- liase with the profession and keep up-to-date with contemporary   97%
  practice issues.

General meetings

There was a high degree of consistency in the responses given by participants at the general focus group meetings. Participants thought that the Board should have a number of specific functions: administering competency assessments, administering a grievance process, and support, public education and liaison and lobbying. There was some debate about whether setting educational standards should be a function of the Board, or of a separate education council established under the same Act. There was general agreement that within the Board, Maori should control processes for Maori social workers.

Hui

There was consistent support for the Board having an active role in promoting good social work practice/training. Like participants at the general meetings, social workers at the hui agreed that the Board should administer competency assessments and the grievance process, and have a role in supporting and liasing with the social work sector.

Question 6   What should the Registration Board be?

Written responses

Just over half of all the respondents thought that the Registration Board should be 'legally separate from the government, but government owned' (56%), 37% thought the Board should be 'private or non-government owned', and just 7% thought the Board should be 'part of a government department'.

A frequent comment was that the Board should be independent from government, so that it would not be subject to the political ideology of a particular government and would be able to lobby on social issues. On the other hand, access to government funding and support was also considered important.

Some respondents mentioned the need for the development of strong links between the Board and ANZASW.

General meetings

It was generally agreed that the Board should be independent of government and primarily accountable to the public and members of the profession.

Hui

There was wide support from most of the hui for a Treaty-based constitution for the Board. Participants at the hui strongly advocated for a separate registration body and process for Maori social workers. The Anglican Church and Women's Refuge were cited as examples of structures that actively facilitate parallel development of Maori and non-Maori.

Fono

There was support for a parallel process where the Pacific community can decide on how registration should work for Pacific social workers and clients.

Question 7   The role of the Registration Board would be to administer the registration system. What skills, perspectives and experience should Board members have?

Written responses

Respondents considered that the most important skills for the Registration Board were:

- legal
- administrative/management/business
- personal qualities such as the ability to make judgements
- objectivity and leadership
- knowledge of social work theory and practice in New Zealand.

Almost half the respondents thought that the most important experience Board members could have was with practical social work and working with a range of ethnic groups. A large number considered that a range of experience was important, including experience in a variety of social work fields and community sectors.

Respondents also considered that Board members should have a commitment to the development of a multicultural approach to social work.

A wide range of people and groups were recommended for membership of the Board. The most frequently mentioned were tangata whenua, registered or senior social workers, representatives from the education sector, clients/consumers of social work services, and representatives of ANZASW.

General meetings

Participants suggested there should be a mix of government and non-government representatives, including consumer advocacy groups. There was support for time-limited terms for membership of the Registration Board with rotation of members to ensure good representation. Some participants supported Board members being nominated to perform the functions of the Registration Board, rather than being on the Board to represent their community of interest.

Hui

Participants recognised that careful consideration needs to be given to appointing Board members. There was universal support at the hui for a strong Maori presence. Several hui also advocated a regional structure underlying a national Board, or regional devolution of functions of the Board. Participants considered that the Board should have members who bring expertise from iwi, Te Kaiawhina Ahumahi, social work educators, statutory social work agencies, community groups, clients and union representatives. Some mentioned the need for koroua and kuia to have a role on the Board.

Fono

Participants of the fono considered that Board members would need to be culturally aware. They also stressed that one Pacific member on the Board could not represent the views of all Pacific nations.

Question 8   Who should appoint the members of the Registration Board?
Question 9   How should members of the Registration Board be appointed?

Written responses

Respondents most commonly recommended nomination and election by stakeholders such as social workers, ANZASW, tangata whenua and client groups. Most respondents supported appointment through an independent, democratic nomination and election process. Other common suggestions were that the Minister of Social Services and Employment make appointments, that a panel of stakeholders elects members, or that a combination of these two approaches be used. Another suggestion included a process of application, interview and appointment.

General meetings

The majority of participants suggested that Board members should be elected by registered social workers.

Question 10   What should be the entry criteria for registration?

Written responses

Respondents were asked to tick either 'yes' or 'no' to a list of eight criteria that could be included to help decide whether a social worker was eligible to be registered.   The percentages that responded 'yes' were as follows:

- recognised academic qualification in social work   90%
- recognised academic qualification in other relevant professions   55%
- evidence of relevant prior learning   90%
- evidence of good moral character   95%
- evidence of cultural competency   92%
- attested supervised practice   95%
- competency assessment interview by the Registration Board   80%
- paper-based exam by the Registration Board.   30%

Some respondents expressed concern that the quality of qualifications is variable. Others commented that a rigid requirement that all social workers have a qualification could result in some competent practitioners being ineligible for registration.

The most common criterion suggested was for evidence of competent and safe practice, such as a minimum period of supervised practice; reports from supervisors, referees or clients; or recognition of the period of social work experience.   Other comments were made regarding transitional arrangements, particularly the need for provisional registration.

General meetings

There was general consensus that the entry criteria should include the following three key elements, which together would make a competent social worker: education, practice and personal attributes.   Participants were keen to ensure that the entry criteria (especially the education component) did not disadvantage Maori, Pacific peoples or women.

There was support for flexibility to allow people to attain the three elements in various ways.   With regard to education, participants recommended that a level 6/B social work qualification be required for registration.   They recommended that qualifications in related professions should not be eligible.   Qualifications could be gained through university, polytechnics or Te Kaiawhina Ahumahi workplace assessment.   Prospective students should be screened prior to enrolling in social work courses.   Participants recommended that the practice component be a minimum of two years and be supervised.   The personal attributes component should include a Police check and general assessment that the individual was fit to practise.

Participants recommended that, like the ANZASW process, a competency assessment should be completed to integrate the three entry components prior to registration being granted. Core competencies would include cultural competence and reference to an ethical base. Standards would need to be set for competency assessors.

Other issues relating to entry criteria included the transportability of qualifications, the ease of finding placements in rural areas to gain practice experience, and transitional arrangements.

Hui

All hui suggested that further work needed to be done to determine the registration criteria. Most hui considered that qualifications should be part of the entry criteria, but should not be the sole basis for entry into the profession. Some participants were concerned about the quality and relevance of social work training courses. Others said that qualifications should be optional, especially when social workers were experienced and competent. Some hui expressed a strong preference for the Te Kaiawhina Ahumahi model of work-based assessments. One hui considered that funding should be made available to help people get training in social work otherwise people won't become registered.

All hui agreed that demonstrated competence was important. Many stated the importance of competence in Maori tikanga, for both Maori social workers and non-Maori social workers who work with Maori clients. All hui were in favour of a separate competency process for Maori social workers, with separate competency standards. Some participants stated that it is important for Maori social workers who work with Maori to be validated by iwi rather than by the Crown.

Some participants considered that the entry criteria should include an assessment of an individual's fitness to practise in a particular community and the recognition of prior learning.

Fono

Participants at the fono considered that registration should be competency based. Qualified and experienced Pacific social workers and the Pacific community should assess registration of Pacific social workers. There was a clear desire expressed that Pacific knowledge and social work practice should be protected and valued. Participants considered that a system that relies solely on tertiary qualifications would create barriers to Pacific people wanting to become social workers. Participants at the fono also stated that there should be a parallel competency assessment process for tangata whenua and Pacific people.

Question 11   Which levels of registration should be able to be granted?

Written responses

Respondents were asked to indicate whether different levels of registration should be be granted. The percentages agreeing to the different levels were as follows:

- full registration   100%
- provisional registration (granted prior to fulfilling all the registration   88%
  requirements)
- limited registration (for social workers with particular areas of   53%
  expertise)
- temporary registration (granted on a short-term basis where tasks   44%
  normally performed by registered social workers are undertaken by
  non-registered social workers)
- exemptions (granted to students on placement).   64%

General meetings

There was general consensus that a 'one-size' registration system would not fit all social workers. For example, students should be able to be exempted or receive provisional registration so they can be employed as a social worker in order to attain the practice component of the entry criteria. However, some participants considered that the system should be kept as simple as possible. Too many different levels of registration may confuse the public and clients.

Hui

Many participants at the hui favoured a multi-tiered system like that used for registered and enrolled nurses. The point was made that social work jobs differ, so the same level of competency may not be required of all social workers.

Question 12   Should there be a renewal process?

Written responses

The majority of respondents (94%) supported some form of renewal process for registration. Some respondents who ticked the 'yes' box made suggestions for a renewal process. These included an assessment of performance or competency, a minor annual review with substantial review at longer periods, or evidence of professional supervision, ongoing training or professional development.

General meetings

Many participants supported the ANZASW position that there should be an annual renewal, plus a five-yearly review of registration with a full reassessment of competency. Social work students from Tairawhiti Polytechnic considered that every social worker should be reassessed after two years. They used the metaphor of a car warrant of fitness. This review would also provide an opportunity for colleagues to keep a check on stress levels and the general fitness of individual social workers.

Question 13   What transitional arrangements should be put in place to support a new registration system?

Written responses

Transitional arrangements most frequently mentioned by respondents were grand-parenting provisions for existing social workers, either allowing probationary periods for existing social workers to meet the new requirements, or granting exemptions for certain social workers (for example, those who are deemed to be competent and experienced). The other common suggestion was provisional registration (for example, to allow social workers to gain academic qualifications). ANZASW considered that existing ANZASW members should be automatically eligible for registration.

Hui and fono

Participants at most of the hui and fono considered that more time needs to be set aside, particularly for consultation with Maori and Pacific people, to work through issues such as the development of competency standards. Taking time to fully develop these aspects would aid the transition to the new registration system.

Question 14   How could the registration system best meet the needs of Maori social workers and clients?

Written responses

Some respondents suggested that Maori social workers should be assisted to meet the criteria for registration. Other respondents suggested providing culturally appropriate training programmes. These programmes would teach Maori and non-Maori social workers how best to meet the needs of Maori clients. Some respondents considered that the legislation supporting registration for social workers should be consistent with the Treaty of Waitangi, and that the registration system should be based around a Treaty framework.

General meetings

Participants were keen to ensure that the entry criteria (especially the education component) did not disadvantage Maori social workers. There was some support for a parallel process, with a Maori Registration Board overseeing the process for Maori social workers.

Hui

Participants at the hui were keen to ensure that registration does not become a barrier to Maori social workers. They therefore recommended an open, inclusive, flexible and client-focused registration system. A number of hui promoted a two-tiered model of registration, similar to the one used for comprehensive and registered nurses. Participants at one hui noted that the system needed to be portable so that it could accommodate Maori social workers who often work across social work disciplines.

Many hui participants considered that registration should focus on competence rather than qualifications. Some participants commented that current training courses for social workers are too narrow and do not adequately prepare social workers for working in the community. They also commented that training and competence in tikanga should be required for all social workers, especially for non-Maori social workers who work with Maori clients. There was widespread support at most of the hui for the unit standards developed by Te Kaiawhina Ahumahi.

It was suggested at one hui that non-Maori social workers/organisations should be subject to Maori audits of practice. Some participants considered that it was more important for Maori social workers to be validated by and accountable to iwi rather than the Crown.

Participants thought that the legislation supporting registration should embody the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, especially the principles of partnership, participation and protection. Some hui recommended referring back to Puao-te-ata-tu.

Hui participants sought a separate structure and processes for Maori, with Maori defining their own governance structure, competencies and models of practice within a wider registration framework. Many advocated for a parallel Maori Registration Board, similar to the models used by the Anglican Church and Women's Refuge. Further, it was recommended that a regional structure be established under a national board.

Finally, there was a general view expressed at many of the hui that more time should be taken to consider important issues such as the development of competency standards and Maori practice models.

Questions 15 How could the registration system best meet the needs of Pacific social workers and clients?

Written responses

The most common suggestion was for enabling Pacific people to obtain social work qualifications by providing culturally appropriate training programmes that teach Pacific and non-Pacific social workers how to meet the needs of Pacific clients. Other suggestions included assisting Pacific social workers to meet the criteria that are used to assess a social worker's eligibility for registration, and ensuring that there is adequate consultation with and representation from Pacific peoples.

Some respondents also made the point that registration must ensure that traditional or voluntary social work done in Pacific communities is recognised and is not inhibited.

General meetings

Participants were keen to ensure that the entry criteria (especially the education component) did not disadvantage Pacific people.

Fono

Participants discussed the need to consider what is best practice and from whose perspective. Wellbeing for Pacific peoples may be different to what is considered wellbeing for palagi. There was agreement that registration must be competency based and assessed by qualified and experienced Pacific social workers and the community.

There was support for parallel registration processes for tangata whenua, Pacific people and Pakeha.

There was a general view expressed by participants that ANZASW was not currently meeting the needs of Pacific social workers. Participants talked about the need for both social workers and members of the Social Work Registration Board to be culturally aware and competent. There was concern about the cost of registration and the ability of practising social workers to gain the required qualifications.

Participants at all the fono requested that more time be made available to discuss how registration could work for Pacific social workers.

Question 16   What types of sanctions should the Registration Board be able to apply?

Written responses

Most submissions agreed with the principle of using a range of sanctions, with the type of sanction depending on the severity of the misdemeanour. Many favoured a staged approach; for example, starting with a written warning for the first 'offence', moving to suspension pending completion of a period of supervision or training for the second, and finally being struck from the register. Of the specific sanctions recommended by respondents, the most frequently mentioned were being struck from the register, being required to undergo a period of supervision, being required to undergo additional training, and temporary suspension (usually while training or supervision was in progress).

Several submissions stressed the need for a clear complaints procedure that would identify the range of possible sanctions and the grounds on which they can be imposed. In addition, several suggested that the Registration Board should maintain a list of substantiated complaints and the sanctions imposed, and that agencies employing or contracting social workers should have access to this information.

General meetings

There was general agreement with the sanctions that were listed in the discussion paper: withdrawal of an individual's practising certificate, suspension, fines, striking off the register, requiring practice to be supervised by a senior practitioner for a specified period of time, issuing a verbal or written warning, ordering additional training or professional development.

The general meetings tended to focus on the grievance process rather than on the type of sanctions that should be imposed. Many participants favoured a process based on reconciliation, including compensation for the client if malpractice were proven.

Participants also thought that there should be opportunities for the client's views to be heard, and an emphasis on support for the social worker during the investigation. Participants recommended that at least one person 'external' to the social work sector be involved in the investigation.

Hui

Many of the same themes arose at the hui as at the general meetings. Participants at one hui considered that the grievance procedure should include a neutral person from the national level who has social work experience, plus a local person. Other participants favoured a system with a number of levels at which complaints could be laid and/or investigated. For example, investigations could be undertaken locally and then nationally if they remained unresolved. Participants recommended providing support for the social worker who was under investigation.

Question 17   Additional comments

A wide range of additional comments were received through submissions on the discussion paper. These comments covered issues such as the resource implications of registration, the minimum standards required for registration, issues to do with ethnicity (including the question of whether different standards should be applied in the case of certain ethnic groups), and the nature of the transition process. The most common comment was that registration is a positive move for the social work profession.

Participants at the focus group meetings were also concerned about the potential costs associated with registration and who would pay: individual social workers, their employers, or government? Many participants expressed the view that costs should be kept to a minimum, otherwise they could present a barrier to some social workers gaining registration.

At all the hui and fono some time was spent discussing a range of process issues. Among other things, these related to the perceived shortness of the consultation period and that the discussion document did not cover issues important to Maori and had no reference to the Treaty. Participants raised the need for more thorough consultation with Maori and Pacific communities before the registration system is fully established.

4.   Next steps

The feedback we received through submissions on the discussion paper and the focus group meetings has informed the development of policy advice regarding social work registration. Cabinet Ministers are still considering policy proposals regarding the establishment and funding of a system for the registration of social workers. The Government is aiming for the Social Workers Registration Bill to be introduced by July 2001.

The Ministry of Social Policy would like to thank everybody who participated in the focus group meetings and made submissions on the discussion paper. The time and attention you have given to this issue is much appreciated. Your contribution has greatly assisted the development of the registration system.

APPENDIX 1

Schedule of focus group meetings held by the Ministry of Social Policy during August and September 2000

Location	Date	Type of meeting	Approx. numbers attending
Whangarei	6 September	Hui	15
		General	17
Auckland	23 August	Hui	40
	28 August	General	15
	5 September	Hui	45
	8 September	Fono	60
Rotorua	24 August	Hui	32
New Plymouth	28 August	Hui	12
Gisborne	24 August	Hui	17
	24 August	Students	12
Hastings	25 August	General	15
	25 August	Hui	20
Wellington	21 August	General	10
	22 August	Fono	15
	30 August	Hui	15
Christchurch	30 August	General	12
	31 August	Hui	15
	31 August	Fono	3
Dunedin	1 September	General	11
		TOTAL	**384**