

Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 3 December 2025

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I open this meeting.

Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19977, in the name of Jackie Baillie, on crisis in social care. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible, and I call Jackie Baillie to speak to and move the motion.

14:53

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): My constituent, Charles McGarvey, was an English teacher, but in 2018, his life changed forever. Following an accident, he became quadriplegic. He cannot use his arms and legs and must rely on support from carers. Life being paralysed is challenging enough, but in the past year, the specialist team that has supported him has disappeared, and he learned only through word of mouth that his overnight care would be terminated.

Mr McGarvey's care needs have not changed. What has changed is the relentless drive for cuts in social care, and his story is typical of many of those who receive social care across Scotland. The United Kingdom Labour Government has delivered more than £10 billion of additional funding for Scotland since 2024, but it is up to the Scottish National Party Government to spend it.

So, where has the money gone? It has not gone into social care. For years, the SNP has underfunded health and social care partnerships—the local bodies that are responsible for the delivery of social care—and now the system is on the verge of collapse.

There is a black hole in their budgets of almost £500 million in this financial year, so it is no wonder that they are being forced to make cuts. At least £90 million has been cut from services, at least £72 million has been cut by reducing social care capacity and at least £68 million has been cut from staffing budgets—the list goes on.

Social care providers in the voluntary sector are in danger of going to the wall, and care homes are closing. Across Scotland, it is the poorest and most vulnerable who are paying the price. We are now funding only crisis care, and only those who require critical care will get support. Everyone else who asks for help will have to fend for themselves.

In North Ayrshire, £500,000 has been slashed from care at home. There were cuts of £200,000 to residents' care packages and £200,000 cuts to day care. They did not want to do that, but the Scottish Government is underfunding them. In Aberdeenshire, there are eight projects closing and there is reduced eligibility for day care centres, while the number of activity hubs for older people has halved. They did not want to do that either, but it is down to the Scottish Government underfunding them. There have been 145 jobs lost in Glasgow to cover a £42.5 million gap. That has led to the loss of a supported living service for elderly people, including people with dementia, and the loss of a counselling service for victims of sexual assault. They did not want to do that, but it is down to a lack of Government funding.

In West Lothian, there is currently a consultation on cuts of £14 million, including a reduction in the number of adult day service support days. Care hours have been capped in Argyll and Bute, where the health and social care partnership is only funding critical care at the same time as closing day services and a care home. In Edinburgh, the health and social care partnership is cutting almost all funding to community mental health

services. None of them want to cut services, but they are forced into doing that because they do not have the budget that they need.

Every few months, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care stands up in the chamber to say that we need more preventative care in the community—and I agree with him. However, that is not the reality on the ground. The reality is that preventative services are being slashed, leaving families to struggle on until they are in crisis. Experienced social care staff are losing their jobs at a time when the sector is struggling to recruit. For example, despite increasing clinical need, there are 28 per cent fewer registered nurses in care homes for adults compared with 2013.

A recent survey by the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland found that 82 per cent of its members are funding shortfalls in contract costs themselves—that has been going on for years. More pressure is being piled on unpaid carers, who are yet to see the breaks that they are legally entitled to. As the story of my constituent shows, even those who have the highest care needs are having their support downgraded.

The SNP Government's neglect of Scotland's social care shames us all. It wasted £30 million and years of Government time on a so-called national care service bill that was a mess and failed to pay for a single extra carer. The Government promised to scrap non-residential care charges, but we are still waiting for that. To add insult to injury, the £20 million that was recently announced to improve social care capacity over the tough winter period is being given to health boards rather than being directed at social care.

In the meantime, our population is growing older and sicker. The number of people who are waiting on a social care assessment is 30 per cent higher than at the same time last year, and nearly 2,000 people every month are stuck in hospital because of delayed discharge, which is mostly due to a lack of social care packages. We simply cannot afford for this to continue any longer.

At best, social care is delivered locally by a range of partners—by the public, private and voluntary sectors working together. That delivery is informed by the views of those who are being cared for and their families. Social care helps people to remain in their own homes without needing to go into hospital, but we are reversing that because of the serious lack of funding. The Scottish Government needs to stop patting itself on the back and spinning the amount of money that it is putting in, which simply fails to match the level of need that is evident and required.

I ask the Government, in all sincerity, to just implement the recommendations of the Feeley report, which the Government commissioned, and to raise the minimum wage for social care workers to £15 an hour, so that doing a challenging job—caring—does not pay less than stacking shelves at Aldi. For five years—I am nothing if not consistent—I have asked the SNP to do that but, for five years, it has said no. For years, the Government has blamed its failures on absolutely everybody else—it is never its fault—and it continues to do so today in its amendment, instead of facing up to and dealing with the crisis.

Scotland has a record budget settlement. This is the opportunity to make deep and meaningful change. The SNP Government must learn the lessons of the past two decades and prioritise social care. It must close the funding gap, prioritise the needs of vulnerable people and show that it values our vital social care workforce before it is too late.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that the Scottish Government's failure to prioritise social care has fuelled a crisis, harming some of Scotland's most vulnerable people, and calls on the Scottish Ministers to work to close the funding gap facing health and social care partnerships and value Scotland's care workforce.

15:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I start by thanking those in our incredible social care workforce for all that they do. Their hard work and resilience ensure that those who need care receive it with dignity and respect, including members of my family and those of colleagues across the chamber.

I do not hide from the issues facing the social care sector that lie in Scotland and for which the Scottish Government holds responsibility—far from it. I know that there are complex challenges that require long-term action. That is why my amendment specifically references the need for the Government to continue to work closely with partners across the sector, including funding local government and the community and voluntary sector, to continue making improvements for the social care workforce and all those whom it supports.

We need a sustainable and fair approach to funding the sector—on that, we can all agree. That is why our investment in social care, despite what Jackie Baillie said, has reached record highs. Our amendment

references the 2025-26 budget, to which the Greens and Liberal Democrats contributed and which includes more than £15 billion for the local government settlement and almost £2.2 billion for social care and integration, exceeding our commitment to increase funding by 25 per cent early and by nearly £350 million.

We continue to invest in our workforce through the real living wage, with an estimated £950 million that enables adult social care workers in the community and private sectors to be paid at least the real living wage. We have committed to establishing voluntary sectoral bargaining arrangements in Scotland, and we have been working through the fair work in social care group to progress that. No one should have to wait for care assessments, families should not be under any distress and their loved ones should be supported and provided with the appropriate care package. I recognise the need for Government to do more, collectively and in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and social care providers, to make improvements.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Neil Gray: If I can get the time back, Presiding Officer, I will take an intervention.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can get the time back, cabinet secretary.

Paul Sweeney: On collaboration and co-operation, the cabinet secretary may be aware of my constituent, six-year-old Brie McCann, who is urgently waiting for a transfer to Great Ormond Street hospital for a heart transplant. Is he aware of that case, and is he doing something to expedite it? It is a matter of hours that we are talking about, which is why the issue is so urgent.

Neil Gray: That is not directly related to social care, but of course I am aware of the issue. I spoke about the issue on BBC Radio Scotland's "Breakfast" programme this morning. I understand the situation, and I have asked for proper collaboration to happen between Great Ormond Street and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to ensure that Brie can get the treatment and support that she needs.

I do not shirk the Government's responsibility to work to improve social care. We are delivering on the commitments of the Care Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, which was passed by the Parliament, and we will establish a national social work agency by spring 2026. I am very open to anyone in the chamber who wants to work collaboratively on the issue. Despite Labour's claims of what it would do in power, I note that, far short of £15 an hour for social care workers, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves did not mention social care once in her budget speech last week.

Vic Rayner, the chief executive of the National Care Forum, said that

"the truth is that the cupboard is bare"

and that the

"budget which neither recognises the contribution or the real cost of adult social care"

feels like

"a missed opportunity".

I must point out the glaring hypocrisy that is on display from the Labour Party today. Jackie Baillie spoke about recruitment challenges, but it is her party that has presided over some of the most restrictive migration policies that are delivering a hammer blow to social care.

I know that Jackie Baillie does not want to hear it, so instead I will share with her some comments from the sector. In May, Donald Macaskill of Scottish Care said:

"When the United Kingdom Government, without consultation and engagement with the care sector ... unilaterally decided we can no longer recruit from abroad, they did so with little appreciation of just how damaging their actions could be."

In November, Donald Macaskill then urged Scottish Labour to challenge the latest migration proposals on settlement, after 15 years of branding them

"insensitive to Scotland's distinct needs".

He went on to say:

"Their impact especially in Scotland's remote and rural communities is incalculable. They also send a damaging message that the invaluable contributions of migrant care workers are not fully recognised or valued."

Does Jackie Baillie support the UK Government's approach to migration that is undermining our communities? I will take her intervention.

Jackie Baillie: That is fantastic. This challenge has been on-going for years now. Year after year, there have been vacancies in social care that the Government has been unable to fill because you do not pay

them enough and because your terms and conditions are rubbish. Migration has been a recent phenomenon in the past two years. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Gray.

Jackie Baillie: You had the power to do something about it, but you have failed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Always through the chair, Ms Baillie.

Neil Gray: I challenge Jackie Baillie to defend her Government's approach to migration, which, in the words of the industry, is undermining our approach to recruitment and retention. She failed to do so because her leader describes it as "brave". There is nothing brave about sacrificing our critical services for our people on the face of supporting a Faragist approach to migration.

We came—*[Interruption.]* We came to expect the draconian and Faragist approach to immigration from the Tories, but under a Labour Government, we have seen an even more severe approach, with a 77 per cent drop to the year ending June 2025 in the number of health and care visas granted by the Home Office.

Labour went even further and closed the social care worker visa entirely, completely undermining our ability to provide care to the most vulnerable members of our society.

Labour will undoubtedly say today that its focus is on supporting jobs for Scottish care workers, but the reality is that the demographics of our ageing population means that we do not have enough workers in Scotland. We not only need international workers to bolster our workforce, but we also deeply value the contribution that they make.

Those international workers make up an estimated 26 per cent of our social care workforce. It is not brave—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Neil Gray: —to undermine our critical services; it is a disgrace.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Made a request to intervene.

Neil Gray: I think that I need to conclude.

Scotland has many talented and compassionate social care workers who have settled here and who call our communities home. We are determined that they will be allowed to remain in Scotland, making a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable.

I move amendment XXXXX

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I discourage members on the front benches from carrying on a conversation while someone else is on their feet.

15:08

Sandesh Gulhane IF: I declare an interest as a practising NHS general practitioner. Scotland's social care system is in crisis—not by accident but because this SNP Government has failed to prioritise it year after year.

When organisations as broad as Scottish Care, Age Scotland, Alzheimer Scotland, COSLA, the Accounts Commission and the Scottish Fiscal Commission all use the same language—"breaking point", "unsustainable", "a perfect storm"—it should shake the Government out of its complacency, but alas, no. Instead, ministers behave as though acknowledging reality would somehow be disloyal to their own mythology, created in their ivory towers, surrounded by quangos telling them how great they are. That is exactly what Neil Gray's amendment is—another exercise in SNP exceptionalism, an attempt to airbrush out 18 years of failure by blaming anyone and everyone else. It is, to be frank, extraordinary.

At a time when delayed discharge is at record levels, when one in five care homes has closed and when thousands wait months for assessments, we are presented with an amendment that is so self-congratulatory that it reads like the greatest hits album of an SNP campfire song.

Decision Time

15:10

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The question is, that motion 1 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

That the Parliament agrees that, under Rule 12.3.3B of Standing Orders, the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee can meet, if necessary, at the same time as a meeting of the Parliament during Members' Business on Wednesday 3 December 2025.

This early draft has been automatically published. It has not yet been completed or reviewed.