

Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Budget scrutiny 2026-27, Future Social Security Spending in Scotland

Written submission by Carers Scotland

Unpaid carers

An unpaid carer is someone who is providing care and support to a family member, partner, friend, or neighbour who is disabled, has an illness or long-term condition, or who needs extra help as they get older. This support can include, for example, assisting with daily tasks like bathing, dressing and eating, managing medication and providing emotional support. There are 627,715 unpaid carers in Scotland, including 13,652 of whom aged under 16¹.

About Carers Scotland

Carers Scotland is Scotland's membership charity for unpaid carers. We work to represent and support the hundreds of thousands of people in Scotland who provide unpaid care for ill, older or disabled family members or friends – fighting for increased recognition and support for all carers and to ensure they have a voice in the issues that affect them.

Key facts about unpaid carers

- Every day nearly 1000 people will become unpaid carers, 44% of whom will be in paid employment.²
- Most unpaid care is provided by people aged 50–64, who are most likely to have the most intense caring roles³.
- More than a quarter (28%) of unpaid carers are living in poverty. 1 in 12 unpaid carers live in deep poverty, 60% higher than non-carers⁴.
- Almost half (47%) of unpaid carers in bad or very bad health are in poverty. This compares to around 40% of the rest of the population in such poor health.
- At some point in their career, nearly a third of working age unpaid carers (32%) have given up work to care, 27% have reduced their hours and 17% have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion because of their caring role.
- Two thirds (617%) of BME unpaid carers suffer financial difficulties due to caring with 52% cutting back on food or utility bills to make ends meet⁵.
- Two thirds (65%) of unpaid carers are struggling to afford the costs of electricity and gas, with 28% cutting back on essentials like food and heating to make ends meet⁶. One in eight (12%) have skipped meals and 11% not eaten for a day to make ends meet⁷.

¹ Scotland's Census 2022

² Cycles of caring: transitions in and out of unpaid care, Carers UK, 2023

³ Fiscal Sustainability Report, Scottish Fiscal Commission 2025

⁴ Poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in Scotland: Carers Scotland, WPI Economics and abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, 2024

⁵ Where are we now? Health and Wellbeing Experiences and Supports for Black and Minority Ethnic Unpaid Carers across Scotland, MECOPP, Heriot Watt University and Oxfam Scotland (2025)

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ State of Caring 2024 Briefing: Unpaid carers and food insecurity, Carers Scotland, 2025

- 28% of unpaid carers reported that they had bad or very bad physical health and 36% bad or very bad mental health⁸.
- A third (33%) of unpaid carers in Scotland are disabled (compared to 24% of non-carers)⁹.
- Unpaid caring is highly gendered. Women make up 58% of all unpaid carers and are 38% more likely to be providing intense care¹⁰. More than two-thirds (69%) of those in receipt of Carer's Allowance are female¹¹.

1. To what extent do you welcome the growth in devolved social security spend? Please explain your reasons.

Whilst we recognise the challenges and difficult choices faced by the Scottish Government, Carers Scotland welcomes the investment in Scotland's people through devolved social security. The growth in spending indicates **a response to need**, including the increasing cost of living, and the implementation of positive, evidence-based developments to reduce poverty. This includes the Scottish Child Payment, a key investment in seeking to reduce child poverty, and expanding eligibility for Carer Support Payment to enable more unpaid carers to balance paid work with their caring role and to take up further and higher education.

Alongside this, a statutory duty for Ministers under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 to promote the take-up of social security benefits has an impact on the level of expenditure for social security. The work to ensure entitled individuals receive the financial support from the Scottish Government, Social Security Scotland, and wider stakeholders is vital, as is having Parliamentary oversight of the duty. There is some evidence of the effectiveness of the strategy, for example, the Scottish Government estimated that the take-up rate of Scottish Child Payment for all children aged under 16 in 2023-24 is 89% and Young Carer Grant, 87%¹². However, this is an area that requires continued focus to support individuals to navigate the social security system, including the complexity of devolved and reserved social security.

Take-up campaigns are crucial to ensuring that unpaid carers and young carers receive the financial support to which they are entitled. Many unpaid carers miss out on support as they simply do not recognise themselves as unpaid carers. More than half (58%) take a year or more to recognise themselves as a carer, with 26% taking five years or more¹³.

Carers Scotland also believes that the growth in social security expenditure also reflects the changes that the devolved social security system was intended to produce – a system that was fairer and easier to access and one grounded in dignity and respect. This reflection of the delivery of the principles in practice can be evidenced by the most recently available

⁸ State of Caring in Scotland 2024, Health and Social Care Support, March 2025

⁹ [Facts About Carers: Carers UK 2025](#)

¹⁰ Scotland's Census 2022

¹¹ Summary statistics for Carer's Allowance Supplement, October eligibility date 2025 and Carer's Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and Severe Disablement Allowance at August 2024, Social Security Scotland/Scottish Government, February 2025

¹² Take-up rates of Scottish benefits: November 2024, Scottish Government (2024)

¹³ State of Caring 2024, Carers Scotland 2024

Social Security Scotland Client Survey¹⁴ which found that 79% of respondents believed that they had been treated with dignity and respect, 77% with fairness and 82% with respect. The majority said that their experience of contact with Social Security Scotland staff was 'very good' or 'good' (85%), that they felt staff listened to them (85%) and made them feel comfortable (83%).

However, there are improvements to be made. Barriers remain, including processing times for applications, particularly for disability benefits, and in getting help from Social Security Scotland to access devolved benefits. This is particularly of concern for people with disabilities and long-term conditions who are 48% more likely to say they faced barriers in this access compared to non-disabled people¹⁵.

Carers Scotland also welcomes the investment of £361.1 million since 2018 to the incomes of unpaid carers and the growth in spending on carer benefits. First of all, it is important to recognise the commitment made to unpaid carers in the introduction and delivery of the Carer's Allowance Supplement, additional payments during the pandemic, the Young Carer Grant, extending eligibility for Carer Support Payment to full-time students and increasing the earnings threshold. These are important developments, as are further planned improvements. Unpaid carers provide care worth an astonishing £15.9 billion each year, a figure that has increased by 19.4% since 2011, yet carers are 56% more likely to be in poverty than non-carers. For those unpaid carers in receipt of means-tested benefits, poverty rates soar to an estimated 60%. Social security is a vital tool in supporting, recognising and valuing the contribution of unpaid carers to our society which must be built upon rather than restricted further.

The delivery of effective devolved disability and carer payments are also crucial in supporting families to manage the significant extra costs of disability. The Disability Price Tag from Scope estimates that disabled households need £1,095 more per month than non-disabled households to achieve the same standard of living. These costs are expected to rise to £1,224 per month by 2029–30, driven by inflation and rising energy and care costs. Devolved disability benefits are an important support for these extra costs but even with social security payments, Scope estimate that disabled people face a £600 shortfall every month, contributing to the high rates of poverty amongst households where someone is disabled.¹⁶

2. To what extent are you concerned about the growth in devolved social security? Please explain your reasons.

Whilst long term sustainability does remain key for social security in Scotland, we share the concerns of the Alliance¹⁷ in their response that such growth is seen through a negative lens rather than a focus on the benefits, including long term benefits, to individuals and to our society of a social security system that provides a strong safety net and provides for dignity and support at times when people need it.

It is important that both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, and wider society, understands and responds to the drivers of demand. Devolved social security has

¹⁴ Social Security Scotland Client Survey Report 2023-2024 (November 2024)

¹⁵ Social Security Scotland Client Survey 2023-2024: Supplementary Tables Report (November 2024)

¹⁶ [Disability Price Tag 2025, Scope](#)

¹⁷ [Social Justice and Social Security Committee Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2026-27 ALLIANCE response](#)

the opportunity to remain stable where both Governments work together as much as possible to seek to ease cost-of-living pressures and deliver effective and preventative health and social care interventions. This has been recognised by the recent Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment and by the Scottish Fiscal Commission, who in revising its assumptions in 2024 (whilst recognising the complexity of reasons, including an ageing workforce and delays in NHS treatment, and increased costs of living), believe that application levels for Adult Disability Payment will fall over time to pre-pandemic levels¹⁸.

However, underpinning all decisions around social security must be challenging the poverty that too many people in Scotland experience. There is irrefutable evidence of the harm of poverty, not simply in the short term, but in long-term outcomes, including to health. Most recently, National Records of Scotland drew attention to the decreasing years of healthy life expectancy in Scotland and the continued gap in overall life expectancy between affluent and more deprived communities¹⁹. Investment in social security to reduce poverty, including child poverty, benefits society and prevents the need for greater investment to manage the consequences of poverty, including ill health, disability and the likelihood of having caring responsibilities.

It is vital the politicians and policymakers in national and local governments and the public are encouraged to recognise social security as a preventative and supportive investment but also ensure that it is not seen in isolation during budget planning, instead as part of a whole system response to reducing poverty and improving lives of people in Scotland.

For example, Carers Scotland has highlighted the role of social care in supporting unpaid carers in paid employment over many years in our State of Caring research. At some point in their career, a third (34%) of working age carers have given up work, 28% have reduced hours and 15% have taken a lower paid or more junior role because of their caring responsibilities²⁰. Good quality social care can be the difference between being able to stay in employment or having to give up paid work. Nearly two thirds (64%) of carers in employment said that having access to more affordable, accessible and reliable replacement social care for the person they care for would help them better manage paid work and caring. However, in our research, just 20% of unpaid carers had received an assessment of their needs (an Adult Carer Support Plan) in the last 12 months and, of these, 39% had received no support, and 64% had areas of support identified but these supports were not provided²¹.

Giving up paid work, reducing hours or taking on a less qualified job has individual consequences – in reduced income and increased poverty including reduced pensions in older age, but it also impacts on the economy with a reduced available workforce and lower tax and national insurance contributions.

A lack of social care support, loss of employment and opportunity and subsequent poverty impacts on the health of unpaid carers. Over a third (36%) of all unpaid carers reported that they had bad or very bad mental health and 28% reported bad or very bad physical health. However, these percentages grow considerably to 59% and 49% respectively amongst carers who report struggling to make ends, illustrating the key role that supporting income

¹⁸ Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment: final report (2024)

¹⁹ Life Expectancy in Scotland 2021-2023

²⁰ State of Caring in Scotland 2024, Paid work and access to employment for unpaid carers, February 2025

²¹ State of Caring in Scotland 2024, Health and Social Care Support, March 2025

has on health. Worryingly, levels of poor physical and mental health are increasing, for example, research showed a 28% increase in poor mental health in 12 months²².

There is evidence that caring is a social determinant of health²³ and data is increasingly showing health inequalities between those who are caring for disabled, older and ill-relatives and friends and those who are not²⁴. Some of these negative impacts are long lasting, and many could be prevented or reduced by a whole system approach, with a strong social security system at its heart. There are also substantial risks to the economy and the sustainability of health and social care services. The Scottish Fiscal Commission recognises this risk: *“the age demographic of unpaid carers and the fact that this age group has seen the largest increase in reporting of a health problem or disability which limits day-to-day activities between 2011 to 2022 poses a risk in the future. This is the age group that carries out most unpaid care who may not be able to do so because of their own activity-limiting health problems”*.

These are just two illustrations of the pressing need for Scottish Government investment, including in social security, to develop in a cohesive way that recognises the co-dependencies, outcomes and impacts across all policy areas. However, Carers Scotland would highlight that the omission of care and carers from the Scottish Government’s National Outcomes reinforces a fragmented approach. The Scottish Government were on the cusp of changing last year with the publication of a new set of draft national outcomes, but have been indefinitely delayed. As argued by the [A Scotland that Cares](#) campaign, a dedicated National Outcome isn’t a panacea, or a replacement for immediate action to reduce the inequalities that carers, disabled people, women and children experience, but it would help to provide a strong focus for coordinated, sustained policy and investment at national and local levels.

3. What is the evidence that spending on devolved social security is effective in supporting those who need it?

Social security for unpaid carers, whilst welcome, remains inadequate to meet need. It is clear from the experiences of unpaid carers that Carer Support Payment (and its predecessor Carer’s Allowance) do not adequately compensate unpaid carers for their invaluable role. Carer’s Allowance had changed little in its 50-year existence and, remains the lowest income replacement benefit of its kind at £83.30 per week for a minimum of 35 hours of care. For those unpaid carers who receive support through Universal Credit or other means tested benefits the level of poverty reaches a shocking 60%.

There have been positive developments in Scotland. Carer Support Payment has extended eligibility to most full-time students and increased the earnings threshold to £196 per week, enabling more people to combine paid work or study with their caring role. The Scottish Government also [aims to deliver](#):

- an additional payment to those who care for more than one person which will go some way towards responding to the higher poverty rate (34%) amongst this group²⁵.

²² State of Caring 2023 v State of Caring 2024, Carers Scotland

²³ Public Health England (2021) Caring as a social determinant of health: review of evidence.

²⁴ ONS (2024) Unpaid care expectancy and health outcomes of unpaid carers, England: April 2024.

²⁵ Poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in the UK: Carers UK, WPI Economics and abrdn Financial

- extend the run on time for payment when the cared-for person dies which will help financially support bereaved carers, including those who affected by providing care for the one in six people (17%) people with a terminal illness in Scotland die in poverty²⁶
- and fill in gaps in entitlement between Carer Support Payment and Young Carer Grant.

There is also evidence that the delivery of the Carer's Allowance Supplement in Scotland *"impacted positively on carers' feelings of financial ease"* with carers utilising the payments for necessities they had needed but were unable to afford, including winter heating, household repairs and debts as well and for saving for emergencies. The evaluation also found that carers who were struggling the most financially felt the biggest financial impact²⁷. For the Young Carer Grant, the evaluation²⁸ found that it made a difference to the young carers and enabled them to take part in opportunities available to their peers. Across both evaluations, there were clear impacts on quality of life and individuals felt valued and treated with dignity and respect.

However, it only 1 in 10 carers receive Carer Support Payment and there is a need to increase the value of Carer Support Payment, expand eligibility and provide greater financial support all ages of unpaid carers, including older carers.

4. Do you think further increasing any particular social security payments would be a cost-effective way of reducing child poverty? If you think that it would, what increases to which payments should be considered?

As noted in the previous section, Carers Scotland believes that the value of Carer Support Payment should be increased and eligibility should be extended. This should include redressing the overlapping benefits rule that affects many older carers, who are not entitled to support despite their caring role.

We also believe there is a need for a greater focus within the social security system in Scotland on the complexity of caring and its impact on poverty for parent carers with a disabled child or who have non-disabled children and caring responsibilities for an adult.

Carers Scotland's State of Caring survey in 2024 found that parents with a disabled child under 18 and from unpaid carers of disabled adult(s) who also had parental responsibility for a non-disabled child faced great financial struggle. The evidence from these carers showed that both groups were experiencing significant challenges with their incomes. A third (33%) of both groups were struggling to make ends. Research by Carers UK and WPI Economics also found that over a third (34%) of "sandwich carers" - carers who for two generations at once, for example, their disabled children and parents – live in poverty²⁹.

Evidence from State of Caring 2024³⁰ showed that the impact of poverty and struggle to make ends meet was significant for parent carers and carers with children is significant, with 39% struggling to afford the costs of food, 68% the cost of electricity/gas, 56% the cost

Fairness Trust, 2024

²⁶ Dying in Poverty in Scotland 2024, Marie Curie Scotland (2024)

²⁷ Carer's Allowance Supplement: evaluation, Scottish Government (2020)

²⁸ Young Carer Grant: interim evaluation, Scottish Government (2021)

²⁹ Poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in the UK: Carers UK, WPI Economics and abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, 2024

³⁰ State of Caring Survey 2024

of transport and 70% struggling to afford clothing and shoes. Worryingly, more than two thirds (37%) were cutting back on essentials and building unsustainable debt on credit cards and overdrafts to make ends meet.

The impact of poverty reached into keeping a roof over their head. Over a quarter (27%) were struggling to afford their rent or mortgage, 53% repairs to their home, with 9% in arrears with housing costs and 8% forced to move to a cheaper rental property. However, two thirds (72%) could not afford to move to a home more suitable to the needs of the person they cared for.

Carers Scotland believes that expanding eligibility for Scottish Child Payment to both groups where the parent or guardian is in receipt of Carer Support Payment (in addition to those who qualify through other means tested routes) and Child Disability Payment could bring gains in reducing poverty and financial struggle. This includes focusing on the additional costs and barriers that parent carers with a disabled child experience, including childcare, breakfast clubs and activities including leisure and sport.

However, Carers Scotland believes in the longer term that the Scottish Government and MSPs across the political spectrum could be bold and seek to take the early steps in delivering a Minimum Income Guarantee. A Minimum Income Guarantee would ensure that no one falls below an agreed income level set to allow everyone to live a dignified quality of life, offering financial security and unlocking opportunities for all. This income level would be achieved through a combination of fair and accessible paid work, reform on costs, high quality services and stronger social security.

The report³¹ developed by the Minimum Income Guarantee Expert Group sets out these early steps and a roadmap for delivery. This includes pilots with certain groups. For unpaid carers, Carers Scotland and IPPR have developed a pilot proposal³² Carers Scotland have developed with IPPR Scotland would provide enhanced access to health and wellbeing support and employability, where requested, and provide targeted payments, and increased access to other free or discounted services to be provided or subsidised by the state. Under this pilot, a target group of unpaid carers in Scotland who care for someone more than 20 hours a week and receive Universal Credit or Pension Credit would benefit from an additional income supplement alongside a focused effort to maximise income from eligible benefits. Maximising the income of unpaid carers and bringing them up to a minimum income standard, they will have greater flexibility and opportunity to increase their own independence, take up employability and educational opportunities, improve their health and wellbeing, and reduce the poverty they experience.

5. What are your views on the advantages and disadvantages of universal benefits compared to those targeted at low-income households?

There remain advantages to universality in simpler and less costly administration, increased accessibility to individuals, higher take up and reduced stigma. Benefits also extend to societal benefits of solidarity and public support. In addition, means testing often disadvantages those who have low incomes (but above the cut-off point) who have extra costs and reduced earning opportunities due to disability, ill health, age or caring

³¹ Minimum Income Guarantee: report - a roadmap to dignity for all, Minimum Income Guarantee Expert Group (2025)

³² Minimum Income Guarantee for unpaid carers Developing a pilot programme, Carers Scotland and IPPR Scotland (2025)

responsibilities. This includes disabled people who face, often significant, care charges for essential social care services from local authorities. However, on balance a mix of targeted approach and universality may be beneficial.

6. To what extent is the Scottish Government's ability to manage the devolved social security budget affected by UK Government policy choices?

Carers Scotland has significant concerns over the impact of UK Government policy choices on the devolved social security budget. The recent proposals by the UK Government to reduce access to Personal Independence Payment and the health element of Universal Credit were deeply concerning. The National Carer Organisations consulted with unpaid carers as part of these proposals and many unpaid and almost all (97%) said that the reform proposals would make it harder for them to provide care. At that time, The DWP's own impact assessment estimated that 150,000 unpaid carers in the UK would lose access to Carer's Allowance and Carer Element in Universal Credit (UC) by 2029/30 as a result of the tightening of eligibility criteria in Personal Independence Payment.

Despite protection for existing claimants and a separate review of Personal Independence Payment, changes for future disabled people and unpaid carers within Universal Credit remain, creating more complexity and uncertainty for individuals in Scotland and with many questions outstanding, including on future passporting of devolved disability benefits for the health element within Universal Credit and effects on the Scottish Block Grant.