

Health, Care and Sport Committee
16 September 2026
4th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Supplementary written evidence from the Scottish Government

Scottish Government, Health Care and Sport Committee Written Evidence Submission

The Programme for Government published 1 September¹, sets out an ambitious agenda for the next five years to improve health outcomes, renew public services and ensure Scotland's health and care system is sustainable for the future.

Health and Care priorities are centred on delivering better outcomes for patients and service users through reform, prevention, improved access to care and stronger partnership working across the health and social care system. Central to this is the Programme for Government commitment to public service reform, ensuring services are organised around people, focused on prevention and delivered as close to communities as possible

Delivering these priorities will require close partnership working across national and local government, the NHS, the social care sector, the third sector and the workforce.

Reform of Health and Social Care Services

Scotland faces significant challenges, including an ageing population, increasing demand for services, workforce pressures and constrained public finances. In response, the Programme for Government places public service reform at the heart of this administration's agenda to ensure that services designed for the challenges of the past are able to respond effectively to the demographic, financial and operational pressures of the future.

Our objective is to build a health and care system that is simpler, more joined-up and more responsive to the needs of the people who rely on it. We want services that are designed around people's needs rather than organisational boundaries, with clearer accountability and greater consistency in delivery.

We must ensure that the most effective structures are in place to deliver the ambitions of the Population Health Framework² and the Service Renewal

¹ The Programme for Government sets out the Scottish Government ambitions for the next five years and can be found at <https://www.gov.scot/programme-for-government/>

² Population Health Framework: A Prevention-Focused Approach to Improving Scotland's Health and Reducing Inequalities (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2025). Published jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA, it sets out a long-term approach to improving population health and reducing health inequalities through action across the social, economic and environmental factors that influence health and wellbeing. Available at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-population-health-framework/>

Framework³. The Programme for Government therefore sets out our intention to simplify NHS structures by replacing the current 14 territorial NHS Boards with two Strategic Health Boards, covering the east and west of Scotland. This work is intended to support clearer accountability, more consistent service delivery and more effective use of resources, while maintaining a strong focus on local service delivery and the needs of rural and island communities.

Alongside this, we will undertake intensive engagement with local government and partners on the next phase of social care reform. Our objective is to ensure people can live healthy, independent lives in their communities for as long as possible, while making services easier to navigate, more person-centred and better integrated.

Digital innovation will also be a key enabler of health reform. We will continue the rollout of MyCare.scot, develop a Digital Health and Care Record and establish an AI Hub to support the safe adoption of innovation across health and care services.

Together, these measures will help create more joined-up services, improve access and support better outcomes for patients and service users.

Reducing Waiting Times, Improving Access and Flow

Reducing waiting times and improving access to treatment remains one of my highest priorities.

We are building on strong progress made in increasing activity and reducing the longest waits. The Programme for Government commits to ensuring that by the end of this Parliament no one will wait more than 26 weeks for treatment.

This year we are investing record levels of funding in health and social care, including targeted investment to increase planned care capacity, reduce backlogs and improve access to treatment. We are also taking a more coordinated national approach to managing waiting lists, ensuring patients can benefit from available capacity across Scotland and receive treatment according to need rather than geography. We will continue to use national capacity, including National Treatment Centres and collaborative approaches across NHS Scotland, to ensure patients receive timely treatment regardless of where they live.

Alongside this work, we are taking forward wider reforms to improve patient flow across health and social care services, helping people access the right care at the right time and ensuring they can move through the system safely and efficiently. The recently published Health and Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031⁴ sets out our ambition for one connected system with simpler routes to care, helping people

³ Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework (Scottish Government, 2025), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-social-care-service-renewal-framework/>. The Framework provides a high-level guide for reform to improve the sustainability, quality, efficiency and accessibility of health and social care services in Scotland

⁴ Health and Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031 (Scottish Government, 2026), available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-care-improving-flow-plan-2026-2031>

receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time. Ministers also remain committed to exploring bespoke solutions for our island communities.

Through expansion of Hospital at Home services, strengthened community-based support, improved discharge processes and new Integrated Navigation Centres, we will improve the experience of care, reduce delays and support more sustainable services. Further detail on this work was provided in my correspondence to the Committee on 31 August.

Prevention and Population Health

Improving Scotland's health requires a sustained shift towards prevention and early intervention.

Prevention is not solely the responsibility of the NHS. Improving health outcomes requires action across public services and on the wider determinants of health, including poverty, housing, education and employment. Prevention-first approaches will therefore be central to both health improvement and wider public service reform during this Parliament

The Population Health Framework and Service Renewal Framework continue to underpin our long-term approach to improving outcomes and reducing health inequalities.

The Programme for Government includes a range of preventative measures, including action on tobacco and vaping, expansion of vaccination and screening programmes, delivery of community-based Healthy Heart and Lung Checks, and continued action to reduce drug and alcohol related harm, including delivery of the National Mission on Drugs, expansion of residential rehabilitation capacity, improved access to treatment and support services, and work to reduce alcohol-related harm through prevention and early intervention approaches.

We will continue to work across government, local authorities, the NHS, the third sector and communities to address the wider determinants of health and tackle inequalities.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Improving mental health and wellbeing remains a core Government priority. Current activity includes investment in community mental health and wellbeing, and work to improve access to mental health services, with a particular focus on prevention, early intervention and reducing inequalities.

We will continue to invest in prevention, early intervention and community-based support, recognising the importance of mental wellbeing to overall population health.

The Programme for Government commits to expanding access to community mental health support, including mental health walk-in hubs, extending Mental Health Triage Cars across Scotland, expanding NHS 24 Mental Health Hub services, and continuing investment in community-based wellbeing services.

We will also publish a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan and continue action to improve support for people with neurodevelopmental conditions, ensuring people can access timely and appropriate support.

Social Care Reform

Reform of social care will be a key priority during this Parliament.

The Programme for Government commits to a three-month period of engagement with local government and partners to agree the next phase of social care reform, with the aim of delivering services that are more person-centred, sustainable and easier to navigate. This work will consider how health, social care and local government can work together more effectively to provide consistent, sustainable services while maintaining a strong focus on local needs and communities

Alongside this, we will continue to invest in the social care workforce, including support for the Real Living Wage and work towards sectoral bargaining arrangements. We will also strengthen independent living and community support, helping more people to remain connected to their communities and reducing pressure on hospital services.

Community Services and Primary Care

A key priority is shifting the balance of care from hospitals to communities. We will continue to strengthen primary care services through significant investment in general practice, expanded community-based services and innovative models of care.

This includes investment of more than £530 million in core general practice over the next three years, helping to stabilise and sustain general practice and ensure patients can continue to access high-quality care in their local communities. We will also expand GP walk-in services, improve access to diagnostics and community-based hearing, vision and other services, and further develop multidisciplinary primary care teams that bring together GPs, nurses, pharmacists and other professionals to meet people's needs more effectively.

These measures support our wider Community First approach and our ambition to deliver more care closer to home.

Workforce

Our workforce remains central to the delivery of these ambitions. We are committed to working closely with staff, professional bodies and trade unions as reforms are developed and implemented.

Successful reform depends on the workforce. Consistent with the Programme for Government, we will work in partnership with staff, professional bodies and trade unions to design and implement changes, ensuring those delivering services play a central role in shaping them. Alongside this, we will continue to focus on recruitment

and retention, workforce wellbeing, education and training, and workforce planning to ensure services have the capacity and capabilities required to meet future demand.

As care increasingly shifts towards prevention, community-based support and multidisciplinary models of care, we will support the development of the workforce needed to deliver these services, including strengthening career pathways and creating opportunities for staff to work across organisational and professional boundaries. The Programme for Government also includes measures to strengthen recruitment, workforce planning and career development across health and social care professions, helping to ensure Scotland has a sustainable workforce equipped to deliver high-quality care in the years ahead.

Conclusion

The Programme for Government sets out a clear vision for a health and social care system that is more sustainable, more integrated and more focused on prevention. Through reform, investment and partnership working, we will improve access to care, tackle inequalities, support our workforce and ensure that people across Scotland can access high-quality health and social care services when and where they need them.

Above all, our ambition is to ensure that health and care services are designed around the needs of people and communities, with prevention, early intervention and partnership at their heart, supporting the wider renewal of Scotland's public services throughout this Parliament.

15 September 2026