

SP2026 Manifesto Analysis

Social care and ageing population: Scotland's biggest impending crisis?

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Purpose, scope and method

Scope

This analysis examines what the six main parties contesting the 2026 Scottish Parliament election say about social care and the ageing population. It covers workforce pay and conditions, unpaid carers, the status of the National Care Service, delayed discharge, ownership and provider mix, and longer-term funding sustainability.

Purpose

Rather than look at individual manifestos or the differences between them, I have taken what might be an unconventional approach and looked at commonalities: **where might the parties set aside ideological and tribal politics to work together in the interests of Scotland?**

After all, even if the SNP get a majority it may be a fragile one. The probability remains that throughout or at some point in the parliament, two or more parties will have to work together. That is exactly how the parliament was intended to work. It does on many occasions, but not nearly enough.

There are also a skint public sector and a stagnant economy. We aren't going to solve those issues without more collegiate working.

Method - please read these important notes

I have not done this as paid or even unpaid work for any client. It has been for my own interest and as a contribution to reframing the conversation between the worlds of politics, business and society.

It would not have been humanly possible - for your author at least - to read, digest and cross-reference all of the manifesto content and produce a timely report. Therefore I have used a sophisticated AI tool to help before doing a light-touch review and edit of the most important points. **Both AI and human may have made mistakes. Please do not rely on it as definitive.**

Talking points represent my view and are designed to support further discussion and enquiry.

All page references cite the published PDF page number. Page references are not definitive of a party's whole position - they are signposts to one or more places where policy points are mentioned, not a comprehensive index.

Parties covered: Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Labour, SNP, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Greens and Reform UK Scotland. They are listed in no particular order.

Links to manifestos

- [Scottish Conservatives manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Labour manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [SNP manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Liberal Democrats manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Reform UK Scotland manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Greens manifesto \(PDF\)](#)

Cross-party consensus

Social care is theme on which all six parties accept the same premise: the system is in crisis and is the principal cause of NHS delayed discharge. Unpaid carers carry too much burden. The workforce needs better pay. Free personal care should be retained. Beyond those shared headlines, the manifestos diverge - not just on method but on whether structural reform is needed at all.

Broad agreement (four or more parties)

- **The social care workforce needs better pay and a clearer career path.** Labour and the Greens commit explicitly to £15 per hour. The SNP, Lib Dems and Conservatives back Fair Work or national bargaining without a specified rate. Reform is silent on pay but backs council flexibility. (Labour p.15, 25, 95; Greens p.57; SNP p.61; Lib Dems p.37; Conservatives p.60)
- **Unpaid carers need more support.** All six parties propose something. Conservatives restore the Carer Supplement; Labour offers career pathways for paid carers; the SNP commissions annual NHS health checks for unpaid carers; the Lib Dems uplift Carer Support Payment by £400 a year; Reform removes the £10,192 earnings cliff edge; the Greens triple the Young Carer Grant. (Conservatives p.17-18; Labour p.25; SNP p.57; Lib Dems p.38; Reform p.6; Greens p.42)
- **Free personal care should be retained.** All six manifestos retain free personal care. None proposes means-testing or re-introduction of charges.
- **Delayed discharge is the NHS-care boundary issue.** Labour pledges 300 step-down beds and 1,000 extra care-at-home packages. The Conservatives propose using spare care home capacity for medically-fit patients. The SNP commits more funding. The Lib Dems frame saving the NHS as fixing social care. Reform and the Greens link integration to wider reform. (Labour p.15, 19, 25; Conservatives p.60; SNP p.57; Lib Dems ch.6; Reform p.8; Greens p.57)

Narrower agreement (two to three parties)

- **Sectoral bargaining in social care.** The SNP commits to extend Fair Work and sectoral bargaining; the Greens back collective sectoral bargaining starting with union recognition; the Lib Dems back national bargaining. Three different legal vehicles for the same outcome. (SNP p.61; Greens p.57; Lib Dems p.37)

- **The National Care Service as originally conceived is gone.** Labour wants “a National Care Service worthy of the name”. The SNP reduces scope to a renewal of how NHS and social care work together. The Conservatives and Lib Dems both point to the failed centralisation programme as vindication. Reform backs council control. The Greens want public or community ownership of failing care homes. Nobody commits to reviving the original Bill. (Labour p.25; SNP p.17; Conservatives p.60; Lib Dems ch.6; Reform p.8; Greens p.57)
- **Pay parity or structured pay progression.** The Greens want pay parity between NHS and social care nurses. Labour ties £15 to career pathways. The SNP extends Fair Work where public funding flows. (Greens p.57; Labour p.25; SNP p.61)

Talking points

The National Care Service - what now?

The original National Care Service Bill was withdrawn in 2024 after around £30m of preparatory spend. None of the six parties commits to reviving the original model.

Labour’s “NCS worthy of the name” is rhetorical until the legal vehicle and cost are published. The SNP’s “renewal” framing is narrower than the original ambition and accepts the integration authorities as they stand. The Greens’ move to public or community ownership of failing care homes is the only proposal that changes the provider mix.

Ageing population - longer-term funding

As far as I can see no party has a proposal for a long-term funding settlement that addresses the demographic curve.

The Greens are alone in calling for a sustainable funding model for an era of growing need. They stop short of naming the model: tax, social insurance or expanded charging. That is the hard policy question none of the parties wants to answer. Free personal care becomes more expensive every year as the over-75 population grows; nobody models the cost curve.

Workforce planning for an ageing population is linked to immigration policy. Reform attacks the visa shortage list; the SNP supports it; the Lib Dems flag key-worker housing for care staff. The maths of social care without overseas recruitment does not work on any realistic trajectory.

Provider mix and ownership

The Greens' proposal to move failing care homes into public or community ownership is the most interventionist position. Cost, legal trigger and appeal route are not set out.

Reform's council flexibility framing could mean re-municipalisation, though the manifesto does not commit to that. Labour's crack-down on poorly run care homes is aimed at regulatory tightening rather than ownership change. The Conservatives retain the current mixed economy.

Workforce pay

Labour and the Greens commit to £15 per hour. The joint trade unions have been pushing for this rate. The cost, phasing and interaction with Real Living Wage updates is not published in either manifesto. The Lib Dems and SNP back national or sectoral bargaining without a minimum rate.

Reform proposes greater council flexibility and removal of the earnings cliff edge, but is silent on hourly pay floors. The workforce gap, which is the operational bottleneck in the system, is not directly addressed. The Conservatives' Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy is a framework, not a pay commitment.

Delayed discharge and capacity

Labour's 300 step-down beds and 1,000 extra care-at-home packages is the most specific operational commitment. The Conservatives' spare-capacity approach is not new; the commissioning rules that make it work at scale - a prescribed package, agreed price, clarified who pays - are not set out.

Capital investment for new care home stock is mentioned by nobody. Demographic projections put bed demand up by around 20% over the next decade depending on the source; I don't see this addressed.

Unpaid carers

Every party names unpaid carers. Reform's removal of the £10,192 earnings cliff edge is probably the clearest single gain for working carers. The Lib Dems' £400 uplift to Carer Support Payment is the clearest income commitment. The Greens' tripling of the Young Carer Grant is the most specific demographic intervention. All six acknowledge the right to a break.

What else is missing from most manifestos

The role for technology and assistive devices in care at home. Continuing-healthcare boundary disputes between NHS and local authorities. Self-directed support and personal budgets. Care-home insolvency contingency planning. Palliative care. All of these could be material to social care policy over the next decade; none is prominent in any manifesto.

At a glance

The table below summarises each party's headline approach to social care and the ageing population.

Theme	Conservatives	Labour	SNP	Lib Dems	Reform	Greens
National Care Service	Reject centralisation; workforce strategy	NCS "worthy of the name"; consolidate 50+ quangos	Renewal of NHS and social care; not original NCS	Forced centralisation out of budget; rights-focused	Council control with greater flexibility	Public or community ownership of failing care homes
Care worker pay	Workforce strategy; rate not specified	£15/hr minimum; career pathways	Sectoral bargaining via Fair Work; rate TBD	National bargaining; rate TBD	Council flexibility; rate not specified	£15/hr with uplifts; pay parity with NHS nurses
Unpaid carers	Restore Carer Supplement	Career recognition; respite	Annual NHS health checks; respite uplift	£400 uplift; Young Carers' Lead in every school	Remove £10,192 earnings cliff edge	Triple Young Carer Grant; review CSP eligibility
Delayed discharge	Spare care home capacity for fit patients	300 step-down beds; 1,000 care-at-home	Increased funding for social care	Fix social care to relieve NHS	Integration via Healthcare Reform Commission	Integrated NHS and social care funding
Provider mix	Mixed; opposes centralisation	Crack down on poorly run care homes	Mixed with Fair Work conditionality	Mixed; human-rights approach	Stronger council role	Public or community ownership where private fails
Ageing population funding	No long-term model	No long-term model	No long-term model	No long-term model	Commission to consider funding	Sustainable funding model called for
Key differentiator	Decentralised workforce and capacity unblocking	Structural consolidation plus pay floor	Renewal over revolution; carer health checks	Carer income uplift and human-rights framing	Local control plus cliff-edge removal	Public ownership and long-term funding question

Scottish Conservatives

General thrust

The Conservatives reject SNP centralisation of social care, defend free personal care and accept the system is not working well. The focus is on workforce strategy and unblocking delayed discharge using existing care home capacity. (p.60)

Key proposals

- **NCS rejected:** delivered via a Health and Social Care Workforce Strategy rather than centralisation. (p.60)
- **Delayed discharge:** use spare capacity in local care homes to discharge medically fit patients with a suitable care package. (p.60)
- **Unpaid carers:** restore Carer Supplement; protect carer benefits. (p.17-18)
- **Pensioners:** restore Cold Weather Payment. (p.17)

How they propose to fund it

No dedicated social care budget envelope. The workforce strategy is referenced without pay or recruitment commitments. Use of spare care home capacity requires a commissioning-rule change and a unit-price settlement neither of which is published. In the absence of a centralising vehicle, the mechanism holding integrated commissioning together across 32 councils is not described.

Scottish Labour

General thrust

Labour treats social care as the rescue lever for the NHS. The manifesto pairs immediate clinical capacity - step-down beds, more care at home - with a pay floor and structural consolidation. Saving the NHS means fixing social care. (p.25)

Key proposals

- **National Care Service:** “worthy of the name”. (p.25)
- **Pay floor:** £15/hr minimum for care workers. (p.15, 25, 95)
- **Care at home:** 1,000 additional packages funded immediately. (p.25)
- **Step-down beds:** 300 in care homes to clear delayed discharge. (p.15, 19)
- **Regulation:** crack down on poorly run care homes. (p.25)
- **Workforce pathways:** career recognition for paid carers; better support for unpaid carers. (p.25)
- **Bureaucracy:** consolidate over 50 health and social care bodies. (p.19)

How they propose to fund it

The £15 pay floor and 1,000 care-at-home packages are not costed in the manifesto. Consolidation savings from the 50+ quango reduction are positioned as the fiscal headroom but the transition cost of that consolidation is not scored. The step-down bed commitment is specific but not priced per bed-week. The NCS legal vehicle is not defined, which makes total cost unknown.

SNP

General thrust

The SNP frames social care as central to enabling people to live well at home and reduces NCS scope to a renewal of how NHS and social care work together. Unpaid carers receive new health checks and respite. The tone is continuity plus selected improvement. (p.17, 57)

Key proposals

- **System renewal:** NHS and social care redesigned together. (p.17)
- **Funding:** increased funding for social care. (p.57)
- **Fair Work:** extend sectoral bargaining and Fair Work into social care; all five Fair Work pillars required where public funding flows. (p.61)
- **Unpaid carer health checks:** new annual NHS health checks via NHS Boards. (p.57)
- **International workforce:** welcome international social care workers via the Welcome Scheme. (p.57)
- **Local planning:** empower headteachers, GPs and others on workforce planning. (p.57)

How they propose to fund it

A funding uplift is committed without a number. Fair Work conditionality is cost-recoverable only if commissioners set rates to match. The renewal framing avoids the legal apparatus of the original NCS but also avoids the cost of that apparatus. International recruitment depends on UK immigration policy, over which Holyrood has no lever; no contingency is published.

Scottish Liberal Democrats

General thrust

The Lib Dems claim credit for forcing the centralisation programme out of the budget and for retaining free personal care. The manifesto positions itself as the carers' champion with a human-rights framing. (ch.6, p.36-38)

Key proposals

- **National bargaining:** reward care workers on pay and conditions. (p.37)
- **Human-rights approach:** across social care delivery. (p.37)
- **Continuity of care:** allow carers to build relationships with users. (p.37)
- **Carer Support Payment:** uplift so unpaid carers are at least £1,000 per year better off than Carer's Allowance. (p.38)
- **Young Carers' Leads:** in every school and college. (p.38, 41, 47)
- **Right to a break:** for all unpaid carers, person-centred. (p.38)
- **Key-worker housing:** for care workers to enable recruitment. (p.37)
- **Staff Assembly:** Health and Social Care Staff Assembly to shape policy. (p.28)

How they propose to fund it

National bargaining leaves the pay outcome to negotiation. The £1,000-better-off pledge is not explicitly costed and depends on the baseline assumption for Carer Support Payment. A Young Carers' Lead in every school and college is a sizeable workforce commitment without a published cost. The party's broader fiscal posture is halved consultancy spend and quango review; that is not sufficient for the scale implied.

Reform UK Scotland

General thrust

Reform's social care offer sits inside a broader health, social care and welfare chapter. The headlines are removing the Carer Support Payment cliff edge and greater council flexibility. A Healthcare Reform Commission would consider longer-term integration. (p.6, 8)

Key proposals

- **Healthcare Reform Commission:** funding, integration of adult social care, workforce. (p.8)
- **Long-term funding:** for optimisation and integration of adult social care. (p.8)
- **Cliff edge:** remove Carer Support Payment £10,192 earnings threshold. (p.6)
- **Local control:** greater council flexibility and control over social care services. (p.8)

How they propose to fund it

The Commission is a deferral mechanism. Year-one decisions are not listed. Removing the cliff edge is a clear gain for working carers with a cost in lost taper revenue, which is not identified. Greater council control implies re-municipalisation or stronger commissioning; the transition is not described. No workforce pay commitment and no capital uplift for new stock.

Scottish Greens

General thrust

The Greens treat the failed NCS as a symptom of outsourced provision and underpaid workforce. The manifesto pushes the deepest reform: public and community ownership, sector-wide bargaining and £15 per hour with regular uplift. (p.56-57)

Key proposals

- **Sustainable funding model:** collectively identify a model for funding and delivering social care in an era of growing need. (p.57)
- **Public ownership:** transfer failing care homes into public or community ownership. (p.57)
- **Pay floor:** £15/hr minimum with future uplifts. (p.57)
- **Sectoral bargaining:** collective bargaining across social care; trade union recognition. (p.57)
- **Right to a break:** statutory entitlement for unpaid carers. (p.57)
- **Carer health:** health checks and flexible healthcare appointments. (p.57)
- **Pay parity:** between NHS and social care nurses. (p.57)
- **Young Carer Grant:** tripled to over £1,000 a year; eligibility expanded. (p.42)
- **Carer Support Payment:** review 35-hour eligibility; extend to State Pension recipients. (p.42)

How they propose to fund it

Funding sources across the wider Green manifesto are NDR surcharges, reformed LBTT, a mansion tax and wealth-tax proposals. None is earmarked specifically for social care; the manifesto invites a collective process to identify the funding model rather than naming it. Bringing failing care homes into public or community ownership carries acquisition cost and legal risk that is not disclosed.