



Scottish
Women's
Budget
Group



On behalf of

**A Scotland
that cares**

Embedding care in public service reform and prevention policy



1. Key Messages

Care services, paid care and unpaid care are areas of policy that can support the Scottish Government in delivering the prevention aim of the public service reform agenda.

While progress has been made across these areas, further action is needed to ensure that care policies achieve their full preventative potential.

The Care Policy Scorecard for Scotland provides a wealth of data on these policy areas – relating to progress, gaps and scope for improvement. This evidence can inform future public service reform and help achieve better outcomes for people who give and receive care.

2. Introduction: Public service reform and care

Delivering high-quality, sustainable public services is one of the four priorities of the Scottish Government.

Alongside this, the Government is committed to public service reform with the aim of ensuring that services focus more on prevention, are better joined up, and operate more efficiently.

However, the limited recognition of the role of care and caring infrastructure in Scotland's Public Service Reform (PSR) Strategy¹ (published in 2025) risks undermining progress towards greater prevention. Currently, most of the work linked to public service reform appears to be focused on improving efficiency. But reform needs to be about more than just making better use of existing resources. A Scotland that Cares argues that each of the three pillars of public service reform – prevention, joined up services

and efficiency – are equally important. We also believe that care and care infrastructure are key to helping Scotland make progress towards the preventative aims of the public service reform agenda.

This briefing draws on the findings of Scotland's first Care Policy Scorecard to examine the role that **care** and **caring** can play in supporting the specific preventative aim of the public service reform work currently underway. It highlights issues in key care policy areas, and the need for further policy work and further data and analysis to help ensure that public service reform delivers on its preventative aims and improves outcomes for people who give and receive care.



3. The state of care in Scotland: Findings from the Care Policy Scorecard for Scotland

In December 2025, the *A Scotland that Cares* campaign published Scotland's first Care Policy Scorecard.

The scorecard provides an assessment of how well Scotland's care policies support the people who give and receive care. It presents a percentage score for individual policy areas, and highlights strengths and weaknesses as well as the changes needed to build a transformative caring infrastructure that supports people and contributes to better outcomes. See end page for more information on the scorecard assessment process.

The scorecard is structured around broad areas – or dimensions – of care policy. This briefing addresses three dimensions of particular significance for strengthening preventative services and supporting the aims of public service reform.

Within these broad areas, the briefing focuses on childcare services, adult social care services, support for unpaid carers, and labour conditions and wages of the (paid) care workforce.



Care services

Care services encompass a range of services and support that are important to individuals, society and the economy. These services are crucial for those who use them. However, they are equally important for unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, as their absence increases the pressure on those caring for family members and friends.

Unpaid carers face elevated risks of falling into poverty, and weakened prospects of escaping it once there.² Thus, care services can play a central role in preventing poverty and inequalities from arising in the first place.³ In the case of childcare services, these are also crucial for children's development, and can help close the poverty-related attainment gap.



Care services: can help prevent poverty and inequality, and support people to maintain their independence and wellbeing, thus reducing the risk of needs escalating and helping to avoid or respond effectively to crisis.



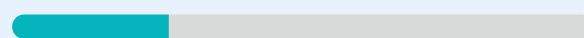
Unpaid care: particularly support for unpaid carers which can help prevent financial hardship and escalating demand for services.



Paid care: particularly support for the care workforce which is essential to ensuring the sustainability of care services.

Scotland's Care Policy Scorecard examined two main policy areas within care services: childcare and adult social care. In both cases, the analysis undertaken indicated that policies remain at an early stage of development:

Childcare scored 27%



Adult social care scored 42%

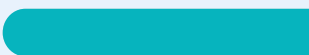


2 – JRF (2024) [What pushes unpaid carers into poverty?](#)

3 – Carers UK (2024) [Poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in the UK](#). A WPI Economics Report for Carers UK



Childcare – 27%



“It doesn’t pay to work which is really sad because I love working.”

Participant in parent focus group for Care Policy Scorecard

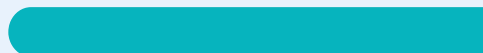
The lack of a formal school-age childcare policy explains the low score for this policy area, despite the progress made in providing funded early learning and childcare (ELC) over the last decade in Scotland. A closer look also shows that ELC is not yet delivering the hoped-for transformative change, particularly for families

on low incomes and families with children with additional support needs, thus undermining the policy’s objective of closing the attainment gap. The areas identified by the scorecard assessment as having the most room for improvement are accessibility and reach, and budget and administration.

While the PSR Strategy recognises the importance of services in this area, the scorecard assessment suggests that a more generous and accessible offer for parents and children that reaches those who would benefit most is needed for both pre-school and school-aged children to deliver transformative change.



Adult social care – 42%



“It shouldn’t be a fight to get the support I need, nor a fight to keep the support I have.”

Care-user quoted in Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland⁴

This policy area encompasses services for adults with additional support needs and services for older people, with both assessed as being at an equally early stage of development, and achieving the same score of 42%. The scorecard assessment showed that eligibility criteria for services and charging practices vary widely between local authorities, creating a postcode lottery for disabled people and older adults. Additionally, rising provider costs, workforce shortages and fragile services limit the

sustainability, consistency, availability and quality of care. National data gaps mean that unmet need is poorly understood, making it harder to plan services and target resources effectively.

Current work on public service reform related to the adult social care sector has been framed around making “best use of the funding in the system”.⁵ Yet the Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland (the Review), published in 2021, identified a “lack of focus on prevention and early intervention” in the sector, as well as limited resources directed at preventative approaches that could avoid people reaching crisis point. The Review also identified a number of areas where additional investment was needed. It is important that the findings of the Review inform current discussions and policy activity relating to the public service reform agenda.

4 – Feeley, D. (2021) Independent review of adult social care in Scotland. Scottish Government

5 – Scottish Government (2026) Programme for Government 2026 to 2031

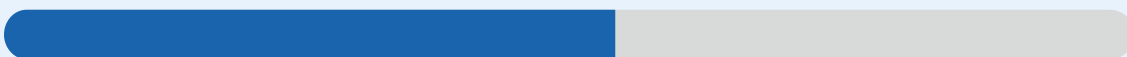


Unpaid care

Within the scorecard, unpaid care encompasses three areas of support for unpaid carers, help for parents with the costs of raising children, and care-supporting workplaces – for example workplace policies and practices that support care-givers. However, this briefing focuses on support for unpaid carers only. This is a crucial area of policy, given the growing number of unpaid carers who are forced to reduce their working hours or leave employment altogether to provide care, and the financial strain that unpaid caring responsibilities can place on carers and their households.⁶



Unpaid carers – 54%



“Aspirational legislation but woeful implementation.”

Participant in carer focus group for Care Policy Scorecard

Financial pressures on unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, can increase the risk of poverty and inequality, potentially undermining the preventative aims of public service reform. Despite Scotland’s clear policy commitments to supporting unpaid carers (as evidenced by the Carers Act (Scotland) 2016 and the associated Carers Charter, and the more recent National Carers Strategy published in 2022), the scorecard assessment for this policy area (and the achieved score of 53%) shows that significant gaps remain, particularly in terms of accessibility and reach. For example, support does not currently reach many marginalised

groups, with research in 2025 showing that 51% of Black and minority ethnic unpaid carers were unaware of their right to an Adult Carer Support Plan.⁷

Pressures on unpaid carers can lead to increased poverty and poor health, potentially creating additional demand for other public services, including the NHS. Thus, understanding who provides unpaid care, the pressures they face, and whether existing support is reaching those who need it is essential to designing effective policy interventions that support the preventative aims of public service reform. Strengthening support for unpaid carers should therefore be understood as part of a preventative approach. Policy that recognises and addresses the financial and other pressures on carers can help prevent hardship and poor health and wellbeing from escalating and, in turn, can reduce the risk of increased demand for other public services.

6 – Carers UK (2026) More than 362,000 people in Scotland have given up work to care unpaid for an older or disabled relative

7 – MECOPP (2025) Where Are We Now?



Paid care

The scorecard assessed four policy areas related to paid care: labour conditions and wages; workplace environmental regulations; migrant workers; and the right to organise.

Paid care workers – the vast majority of whom are women – are at the heart of the childcare and social care sectors. A stable and supported workforce is therefore essential to both

delivering care services that enable prevention, and achieving greater gender equality.

Workforce shortages, poor working conditions and low pay can all undermine the availability, quality and sustainability of care services, limiting their preventative potential. This is why this briefing brings the labour conditions and wage policies area to the fore, with a particular focus on payment of the real living wage.



Labour conditions and wage policies – 55%

“The skills required to care are often seen as innate (particularly to women) and therefore they often aren’t seen or valued.”

Social care worker quoted in Voices from the Frontline⁸

The assessment of the living wage indicator resulted in a score of 62% for those working in social care and a score of 50% for those working in childcare. While minimum wage policy is set by the UK Government, these scores reflect Scotland’s commitment to promote payment of the Real Living Wage in adult social care and childcare. However, given the skilled nature of care work, the scorecard assessment also reflects the ongoing undervaluation of such

work, as evidenced by flat pay structures and limited opportunity for progression. Additionally, in childcare, the commitment to the Real Living Wage only covers those providing publicly funded childcare, while in social care, longer-term wage erosion has been identified,⁹ with counterparts providing similar care within health settings receiving higher levels of pay.

The care workforce is predominantly female, and the undervaluing of care work is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Meaningful improvement requires investment; better terms and conditions; opportunities for learning, development and progression; recognition of the skill and responsibility involved in care work; inclusion of care workers’ voices in policy design; and expansion of sectoral bargaining to ensure pay reflects skill, responsibility, and contribution.

8 – SWBG (2025) *Voices from the Front Line*

9 – STUC (2025) *Report on Residential Care Worker Pay*

4. Conclusions

The Care Policy Scorecard for Scotland provides a timely assessment of Scotland's position across a range of policies related to care.

The evidence presented in this briefing demonstrates that care policy is directly relevant to achieving the preventative aims of public service reform, and the scores achieved provide a useful basis for identifying where further policy work is needed. If Scotland is to deliver care support that ensures people's rights, dignity, relationships and wellbeing are protected and enhanced, then it is vital that the current scores improve.

Overall, the scorecard can provide a framework for assessing whether public service reform is strengthening care services and infrastructure in order to prevent poverty, inequality, crises and address unmet need, rather than focusing primarily on efficiencies within existing services.



5. Recommendations

Based on the full analysis carried out for the first Care Policy Scorecard assessment, A Scotland that Cares has identified 4 main recommendations:

1

Actively recognise the role of care, and unpaid care in particular, within policy design and implementation linked to the public service reform agenda. This means actively considering how each policy impacts on care, paid and unpaid; who is undertaking care; and how policy and the way it is implemented can actively support the reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work. This is critical to meeting the preventative aim of the public service reform agenda and ensuring that policy is supporting greater gender equality, given that the majority of those who provide care, both paid and unpaid, are women.

2

Prioritise investment in care services, fair work for care workers, and support for unpaid carers as part of the public service reform agenda. This will ensure care services are fully accessible for all, particularly for the most marginalised communities in Scotland, and are planned, commissioned and funded in ways that support sustainable, preventative provision.

3

Ensure that funding for care and caring infrastructure is transparent and allocated to realise their full preventative potential, delivering transformative change for individuals, society and the economy.

4

Enhance data collection and use across all areas of care. Completing the scorecard assessment was challenging due to inadequate publicly available data. Better data is essential to understanding current care needs and the impact of current policies and to monitoring and evaluating care policy and public service reform in the future. This must include disaggregated data across protected characteristics, and data on unmet care needs. Without more robust data, Scotland's ability to target resources effectively and improve outcomes for those who need care and support most will be severely hampered.



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About A Scotland that Cares

A Scotland that Cares is a unique campaign of over 50 organisations that believe Scotland must fully value and invest in care and all those who provide it – paid or unpaid.

The Care Policy Scorecard for Scotland includes five dimensions of care policy, encompassing 12 policy areas and 23 indicators.

The five dimensions are: care services; unpaid carers; paid care; care-supporting infrastructure; and cross-cutting services.

The 12 policy areas are: childcare; adult social care; unpaid carers; parents; care supporting workplaces; labour conditions and wages; workplace environment regulations; migrant workers; right to organise; energy; transport; and measurement frameworks and data collection.

There are between one and four indicators for each policy area. The 23 indicators include, for example:

- Two indicators for child care: early learning and childcare and out of school care
- Four indicators for care supporting workplaces: flexible work, sick leave and time to care, leave for parents and breastfeeding at work.

Indicators were assessed in relation to 4 main themes: accessibility and reach; budget and administration; regulation and monitoring; and design and impact.

A percentage score for each indicator and policy area was calculated based on an assessment of the available evidence for each indicator.

Full details of the first Care Policy Scorecard for Scotland produced by Scottish Women's Budget Group for the A Scotland that Cares campaign are available through the [digital scorecard](#).