

Briefing number: 150 Date: February 2025

NCS Bill Update: National Care Service abandoned

Introduction

The Government has finally abandoned its plans to create a National Care Service (NCS). This was [confirmed to Parliament](#) on 23 January. Despite the Government's parliamentary majority when the legislation was introduced, the breadth and scale of opposition to the plans from both inside and outside parliament over almost 3 years made it impossible for the Government to proceed. More than £27 million of public money has been wasted, diverted from where it is needed which is invested in the workforce and in services.

UNISON supports a NCS but not the one proposed in this Bill. UNISON was one of the first organisations to warn about the Bill's damaging implications. For 3 years UNISON has engaged with MSPs and Ministers to seek its withdrawal while advocating for the social care workforce and for our alternative [REAL National Care Service](#). We argued that hugely costly structural change was not the answer to the social care crisis, and that the Bill has always been a distraction from the most important actions needed to tackle this:

- delivering sectoral bargaining for social care and the improvements to pay, terms and conditions needed to eliminate understaffing.
- proper resourcing of councils and the NHS and action to remove profit from care.

This briefing explains the Government's plans now.

What's happening

On 23 January the Government published amendments which delete the entirety of Part 1 of the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill (see [here](#)). **This means that all the structural reforms in the original NCS bill (and the government's proposed draft Stage 2 amendments) have been dropped.**

The original plans for structural change were abandoned in June 2024. These would have transferred statutory responsibility for social services out of local government along with the budget and up to 75,000 staff, putting job security and pensions at risk.

Now the Government's replacement plan has also been dropped. This involved reforming Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs), re-naming them 'local NCS Boards', re-branding all services as 'NCS services' and making IJBs accountable to a new government-appointed quango called the National Care Service Board.

It means the current failed system of IJBs established in 2016 remains in place. IJBs are responsible for commissioning and funding decisions for all delegated social care and community health provision in their local areas. It is clear they are not achieving their intended aim ([Audit Scotland, 2024](#)).

The UNISON logo features the word "UNISON" in a white, sans-serif font, with a stylized white wave graphic above the letters "I" and "O".

**POLICY
BRIEFING**

KEY POINTS:

- **Plans for a National Care Service have been abandoned.**
- **Costly and disruptive structural change in social services has been averted - all plans for this have been dropped from the NCS Bill.**
- **Instead a non-statutory Advisory Board is being set up to advise Ministers on improving social care.**
- **A National Social Work Agency will go ahead.**
- **The failing system of IJBs created in 2016 remain in place.**

The logo for the Bargaining & Campaigns team features a stylized lowercase 'b' in green and a lowercase 'c' in purple, followed by the text "bargaining & campaigns" in green and purple, and "team" in a smaller font below.

Contact UNISON's Bargaining & Campaigns team:

Stephen Low
s.low2@unison.co.uk

Susan Galloway
s.galloway@unison.co.uk

Fiona Montgomery
f.montgomery@unison.co.uk

The new plan – an NCS Advisory Board

What the Government intends to do now is set up an **NCS Advisory Board** - a non-statutory board whose main purpose will be to advise Ministers on how to improve the standard and consistency of provision across the country.

Its appointed members will advise Ministers on how to use their existing powers for social care services. Sitting on the board will be representatives of care users, unpaid carers, care workers, public, third sector and private providers and trade unions. It is likely the independent chair will be an individual with 'lived experience' of accessing care or being a carer. The Board is being set up at speed, with the first meeting expected in March 2025.

The Advisory Board will support the creation of a national Support & Improvement Framework for local services including delegated children's and justice social work services. The new Advisory Board will have a difficult job. It will offer advice about an IJB system already stretched to breaking point with a combined projected funding gap of [£357 million in 2023/24](#) and which is set to make more cuts to essential community services in 2025-26.¹

Government's first responsibility is to resource councils/health boards/IJBs sufficiently to meet local needs. Without this Self-Directed Support cannot work nor needs-based, person-centred care be provided.

What about the rest of the NCS Bill?

The remaining parts of the Bill (Parts 2 & 3) are being taken forward. These will proceed to the Stage 2 process, which Parliament has agreed will be completed **by 28 March 2025**. MSPs have until **19 February** to submit amendments which the lead committee will debate and vote on. The Government own amendments [were lodged on 17 Feb](#). Trade unions will be looking for the Bill to be strengthened in relation to ethical commissioning (previously removed from the Bill), sectoral bargaining and Fair Work in social care.

| | |
|--------|--|
| Part 2 | Information Sharing and Information Standards Provides for an information sharing scheme to be established to join up health and social care records, The standard will cover the processing of data within the scheme. |
| Part 3 | Rights to Breaks for Carers places a new duty on local authorities (s38) Anne's Law ensures visiting rights for care home residents (s40). This has mostly already been delivered through new National Standards. Regulation of social services – includes provision for cancellation of registration and an inspection role for Healthcare Improvement Scotland. Independent advocacy for care users. Procurement - reserving of contracts for third sector organisations. |

The Government also wants to retain some aims from the (deleted) Part 1 of the Bill. In particular:

- **A National Social Work Agency** will still be established, as an Executive Agency of Scottish Government. The intention is to amend Part 3 of the bill to achieve this. Plans for taking it forward will be confirmed soon.
- **There will be one model of integration authority in future.** NHS Highland and Highland Council will be supported by the Government to move from a lead agency to an IJB model, with potential impact on the NHS and council workforce.
- **Strengthening 'lived experience' on IJBs** – secondary legislation may be used to extend voting rights on IJBs.

Action for branches

- **Please share this briefing with members working in social care and social work.** Together we have prevented a damaging and hugely expensive structural upheaval which would have put at risk members jobs, pay and pensions, undermined local democratic control over services and diverted resources from where they are needed – in the workforce and in frontline care services.
- **It shows the power of organised trade union action;** mobilising members in branches and the union's policy analysis, communications and political influencing. This power is being used to achieve sectoral bargaining in social care – keep an eye out for developments.
- **Continue to promote & campaign for UNISON's [alternative vision for a REAL National Care Service](#).**

| | |
|------------|--|
| | <u>UNISON NCS Campaign</u> |
| Jan 2025 | Ministerial statement – plans dropped |
| Nov 2024 | Govt postpones Stage 2 – UNISON statement |
| Sept 2024 | UNISON Response – Scot Govt's Revised NCS Proposals UNISON research report: Care Management: Fit for Purpose? |
| July 2024 | Briefing 145 – NCS Bill Stage 2: Implications for Local Govt Briefing 144 – NCS Bill Stage 2: National Social Work Agency Briefing 143 – NCS Bill Stage 2: Reform of Integrated Joint Boards |
| March 2024 | Briefing 141 – NCS Bill Update |
| Feb 2024 | NCS Bill Stage 1 vote e-brief - MSP Briefing NCS Bill Stage 1 Vote Briefing 140 – National Social Work Agency Update |
| Jan 2024 | Briefing 139 – NCS Bill Update: Revised Government Plans |
| Dec 2023 | Govt abandons original plans, publishes new one |
| Oct 2023 | Launch of UNISON’s research on the alternative Towards a REAL National Care Service for Scotland - summary Towards a Real National Care Service for Scotland – full report e-brief: Update on the NCS Bill Stage 1 vote postponed again |
| June 2023 | UNISON Scotland Vision for a National Care Service NCS – the one we need and the one on offer Press release – UNISON calls for scrapping of the NCS Bill UNISON National Delegate Conference calls for NCS Bill to be scrapped Stage 1 vote postponed again |
| May 2023 | Briefing 124 – A National Social Work Agency |
| March 2023 | Briefing 122 – NCS Bill: Conclusions of Stage 1 Parliamentary Cmttee report Response to the NCS Bill being delayed until June 2023 Stage 1 vote due but postponed |
| Jan 2023 | e-brief – Staff Pensions and the NCS Bill |
| Nov 2022 | e-brief - The NHS and the NCS Bill |
| Oct 2022 | The NCS Bill – A brief guide |
| Sept 2022 | UNISON Response – Stage 1 Scrutiny of NCS Bill Stage 1 Scrutiny |
| July 2022 | e-brief – Local Government and the NCS |
| June 2022 | NCS Bill introduced to Parliament e-brief – National Care Service Bill |
| April 2022 | UNISON raises concerns about the NCS plans |
| Feb 2022 | UNISON calls for KPMG's NCS contract to be recinded |
| Nov 2021 | UNISON Response - Consultation on the National Care Service proposals |
| Aug 2021 | e-brief – National Care Service Consultation Government publishes its proposals for a National Care Service |
| June 2021 | Statement – UNISON Scotland and Reforming Social Care |
| Feb 2021 | Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland |

Additional reading

The whole tale – [SPICE Spotlight NCS bill timeline from the beginning](#)

[Scottish Govt Factsheet explaining its new plan – 23 Jan 2025](#)

Commentary: [How £27 million was wasted on Scotland’s National Care Service](#)



Contact UNISON’s Bargaining & Campaigns team:

Stephen Low
s.low2@unison.co.uk

Susan Galloway
s.galloway@unison.co.uk

Fiona Montgomery
f.montgomery@unison.co.uk