



# Public services: the heart of a fairer Scotland

**UNISON**  
*Scotland*

## **UNISON Scotland Manifesto**

Scottish parliament elections  
2026

# Make this a vote for public services



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The 2026 Scottish Parliament election must be a public services election.

Across Scotland, people rely on services that educate our children, care for our loved ones, keep communities safe, protect public health and sustain local places. These services are not abstract concepts. They are delivered by people; skilled, committed public services workers, whose experience and dedication underpin a fairer Scotland.

Yet for too long, the debate about public services has been reduced to slogans and false choices. Some politicians say there is 'no money'. That digital solutions can replace people. That we can cut millions from corporate costs without consequences to our services. We are told that jobs can be cut through so-called 'natural attrition' with minimal impact on delivery and that world-class public services can be achieved simply by 'taxing the rich'.

Scotland needs an honest, national conversation about the future of public services: what do we expect them to do, how they should change, how they are funded and who pays. Constantly changing needs, require constantly changing services. But

change must mean improving services, not mangling decline. It cannot be a code for cuts.

As *the* public services union we have a significant contribution to make to the debate. We have extensive evidence of what works because we represent 160,000 public service workers across Scotland. Our members understand better than anyone where systems work, where they could work better, and how services can be improved to meet changing needs.

We have consistently engaged with politicians of all parties to make the case for properly-funded, well-staffed public services and we took our campaign *Public services: the heart of a fairer Scotland* to every political party conference last year.

Not all politicians are the same, which is why your vote matters. This election provides a real opportunity to strengthen and improve our public services. Political choices shape the public services we all rely on, and the lives of those who use and deliver them. As Scotland approaches the 2026 election, we ask voters to listen to the voice of public service workers, to look beyond easy answers, and to hold decision-makers to account.

This manifesto is grounded in the lived experience of thousands of workers across education; the NHS; public health and social care; water, energy and utilities; parks, leisure services and libraries; housing, cleansing and the public realm; social work; community care and children's services; police and justice; career advice services and more. It reflects what staff are seeing on the ground: services stretched to the limit, workforces under pressure, and a growing gap between political rhetoric and every day reality.



## Public services: the heart of a fairer Scotland

Of course, a large slice of public funding goes on staff, because public services can not exist without them. Schools without staff are just buildings with children, libraries without librarians are just buildings with books and a hospital bed without NHS staff is just a bed. The truth is that our essential public services have been cut to the bone. Under-resourced and short staffed, public service workers are expected to do more with less as they struggle to maintain the standards the public rightly expects of world class services.

Despite this, the latest Scottish budget promises 15,000 job cuts and £1.4bn removed from public services budgets over the next three years – justified by claims that ‘back-office’ roles can be cut while ‘frontline’ services are protected. This could not be further from reality. Every service depends on a whole system of staff to function safely and effectively.

What our public services actually need is the opposite. Scotland has the longest NHS waiting lists since devolution. Social care is in crisis. Jobs are being cut in police services. Scotland’s councils are being warned that they are in danger of becoming financially unsustainable. These concerns are not just being raised by us, they are echoed by objective, respected voices across Scotland.

Scotland needs a parliament that uses its powers to invest for the long term: properly funding early intervention to prevent costly crises; resourcing children’s services and meeting additional support needs in schools; delivering NHS workforce planning that matches rising demand and brings down waiting times; and fixing low pay, which is the single biggest barrier to resolving the care crisis

and ending delayed discharge in our hospitals. Public services must be attractive, sustainable places to work if they are to deliver for the public.

Like many people across Scotland, public service workers are struggling with the cost of living. After years of below-inflation pay awards, council wages have plummeted by a fifth of what they were a decade or so ago.

Care workers, for example, earn barely above the minimum wage, with increases way behind inflation. This drives chronic recruitment and retention problems across the sector.

Investing in public service workers is investing in public services. Staff need fair pay, good conditions, pensions, training, personal development and the time to innovate and drive the changes needed to modernise our services. Likewise, investing in services supports education, public safety and economic growth. Public services create equal opportunity, provide safety nets, and sustain the foundations on which all of Scotland prospers.

This manifesto is a call to recognise the vital role of public services and to commit to investing in them – and the people who deliver them. Only by doing so can we tackle poverty, strengthen our communities, and build a fairer, more prosperous Scotland.

Public services are the heart of a fairer Scotland.

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## **Public services have to do more with less and less**

The quality of life in Scotland is bound up with the quality of our public services. If we are to have a Scotland which is fairer and more prosperous, we need services that operate to their full potential so that people can achieve theirs.

However, our services are in a parlous state, we have the longest NHS waiting lists since devolution, NHS boards are in financial crisis, social care is a mess, and after taking the brunt of cuts over many years local government is in crisis.

Public services staff have to do more with less. In the last year alone over 1,800 jobs were lost in local government and there are over 3,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS.

The Scottish government has planned a further 15,000 public services job cuts in the next three years. Yet, demand for public services keeps rising.

Colleges are struggling, police services jobs are being cut, Scottish Water is subject to back door privatisation, some universities are in such financial problems they are being bailed out by government, and libraries and leisure facilities are restricting opening hours, or worse, closing.

Not unconnected to this crisis in our public services, a million Scots live in poverty – half a million in deep poverty – and a quarter are children. A widening gulf between rich and poor is driving social inequalities.

It does not have to be like this. The crisis in our services is a choice. It can be solved if the will is there to deliver the investment our services deserve.

This is why voting matters.

## All staff are the services

Investing in staff is investing in public services. A library with no librarians is just a room with books, a hospital bed without NHS staff is just a bed, a school without staff is just a building full of kids.

There are also staff running essential services that the public don't always see: environmental health, trading and building standards, school crossing patrols, environment protection, college administrators, Scottish water staff, social work, university maintenance teams, town and city planners, social care managers, hospital cleaners and others.

A simplistic rigid distinction between 'frontline' and 'back-office' staff fails to understand how services work and demeans the role of everyone who isn't always public facing. All staff enable the efficient running of services.

There is a role for automation and new technology. Staff struggle with outdated equipment and time-consuming processes. But automation and new technology cannot deliver the improved services that citizens need.

Many still need to deal with a human and even the digitally-savvy have individual needs that cannot be met via algorithms.

Public service staff boost our economy by running effective services and spending their wages locally, increasing demand.

However, UNISON has strong evidence that public service staff are leaving or retiring early. Managers report that vacancies are increasingly hard to fill, as pay and conditions and working environments are often better elsewhere.

This failure to fill vacancies increases workloads for remaining staff. Causing more stress and making jobs less attractive. This causes a significant loss of experience too.

Governments must invest in public services and the staff who deliver them.

Delays mean higher costs further down the line. Infrastructure will crumble, people get more unwell and less opportunities creates demand for other services in health, education, justice, social work and care.

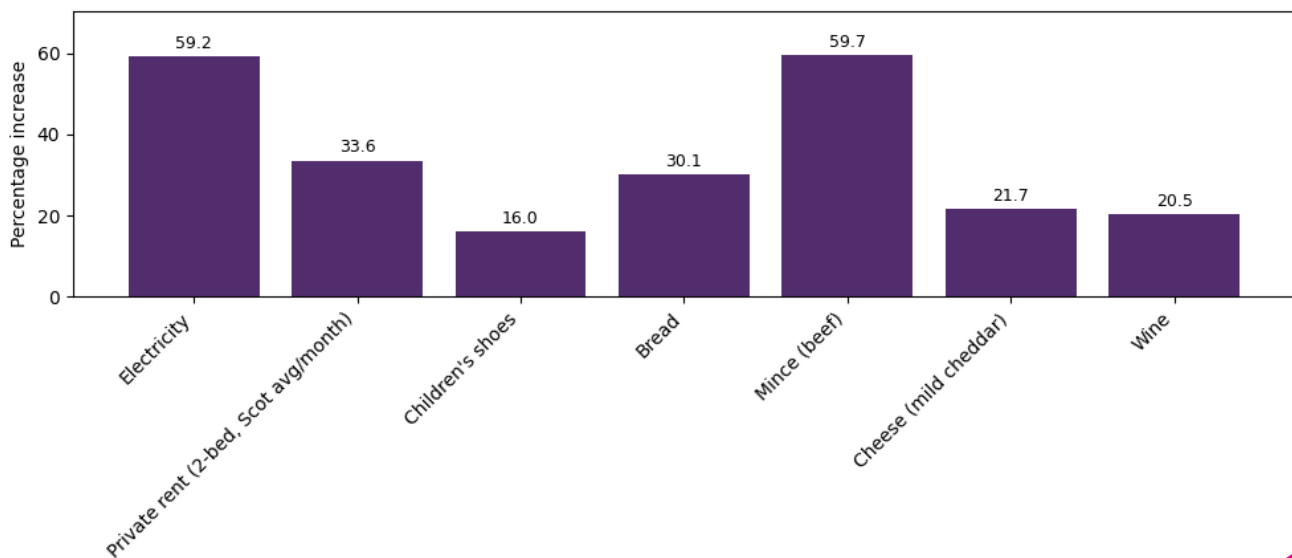
# Cost of living crisis

Pay across public services remains an issue. Some areas are worse than others – but even those sectors with multi-year pay agreements, the decline in the value of pay has not been addressed.

In the last five years the price of food has increased by 37%. Even those pay deals which have, this year, edged above current inflation levels, have not addressed the long-term drop in living standards. Local government staff have seen the value of their pay drop by a quarter over the past decade or so. And social care staff are paid pennies above the minimum.

It is an often overlooked point that just over 40% of any wage rise would be returned to public finances via increased income tax receipts, which accrue to the Scottish government and National Insurance Contributions and reduced Universal Credit expenditure which go to the UK government.

Addressing the crisis in services isn't just a matter of addressing low pay – but neither can the two be separated.



# Key actions for public services

- **Use the Scottish Parliament's tax raising powers to invest in, and grow, Scotland's public services**
- **Urgently replace council tax with a fair property tax.**
- **Invest to save, by funding early intervention to prevent costly crises further down the line.**
- **Build social housing to end the housing emergency.**
- **Deliver every child's right to education by funding additional support needs.**
- **Invest in NHS workforce planning and a modern reward and recognition package for NHS staff.**
- **Make Scottish Water publicly delivered and publicly owned, stop creeping privatisation and obscene chief executive salaries.**
- **Create a national public energy company with powers to own distribution networks and generate energy.**
- **Social care must be fully funded and the long promised sectoral bargaining that is key to tackling the crisis in social care must be delivered.**
- **Speak up for safeguards for displaced workers on visas and to decouple visa sponsorship from individual employers to sector wide schemes.**

## Scottish government's fiscal plans for service cuts

The Scottish government is planning huge cuts to public services. Their *Fiscal Sustainability Delivery Plan* and *Public Sector Reform Strategy* include plans to reduce the size of the public sector workforce by 0.5% a year, 15,000 jobs in total, with a target to cut £0.7bn a year over five years.

This is to be achieved through a programme of outsourcing, automation and offshoring. Services are to be centralised with the hope that staff can be replaced with Artificial Intelligence.

This strategy will not deliver better services or economic growth.

## Finance minister to cut thousands of public service jobs

After finance minister Shona Robison passed her Feb 2026 budget in parliament she confirmed in the media that she thinks the public sector “needs to be smaller”.

The minister said the Scottish government will cut 11,000 public sector jobs and £1.4 billion from Scotland's budget.

On closer examination of the spending review figures (see above), UNISON suggests that the jobs cuts will be nearer 15,000 over 5 years.

The government aims to cut jobs every year until 2030 to reduce spending through a wider-scale public service reform.

UNISON will be at the forefront of defending jobs and services. Public services need investment in staff, not cuts.

## Violence at work remains a key issue across all services

In 2025, UNISON collected Freedom of Information (FoI) data from local authorities, health boards, social landlords and other bodies delivering public services and found a total of 75,411 violent incidents were reported in 12 months, a 15% rise from the previous year.

The figures highlight a concerning trend. More than three in five (63%) of all the assaults involved local authority workers, particularly those in educational settings. Nearly a quarter (24%) of the violent incidents involved staff working for health boards, with 18,579 incidents reported.

Governments, employers and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) should take immediate action on ensuring:

- Accurate and reliable systems for reporting all incidents of violence and aggression, both physical and verbal in workplaces.
- Effective inspection, enforcement and appropriate sanctions on employers who fail to protect workers.
- HSE to prioritise inspections regarding violence against all staff as a priority for proactive inspections, and greater resources to be diverted to all proactive health and safety enforcement activity.
- Consultation with trade unions on measures to tackle work-related violence at both national and local level.

## Poverty in Scotland

Joseph Rowntree Foundation tell us over a million people in Scotland live in poverty – half a million in deep poverty – and a quarter are children. This has changed little in over a decade.

Too many public service workers are themselves living in poverty.

Many have insecure work, working two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet. This also impacts on their ability to build a decent pension meaning poverty continues into their retirement.

Poverty in Scotland will not end unless we invest in our public services.

Services in crisis must become services which support people in crisis. Social care, health, early years, further and higher education, and our police and justice services, are at the heart of the drive to end poverty – whether in councils, the NHS, or the community.

Public services are by people for people: carers helping a vulnerable person, support staff ensuring all pupils take part in school, college staff equipping us with skills for the future, or a physio getting us back on our feet and back to work.

Public service staff provide essential services to lift people out of poverty.

# Funding public services

‘Not enough money’ is a political choice – not a necessity. Public services in Scotland are underfunded. This is because governments have chosen not to use all the powers at their disposal to raise sufficient money. Tax levels under Holyrood’s control, including income tax, are only minimally different to those in the rest of the UK.

The outcome of this is a growing gap between the money the Scottish government brings in and the amount it intends spending – that gap is being filled by putting services and staff under ever greater pressure. You cannot keep hollowing out services and expect them to keep functioning. We welcome the extra social entitlements such as the Scottish Child Payment. What UNISON cannot accept is the false choice that these come as an either / or to decent public services and decent treatment for those who deliver them.

The Scottish Parliament has huge tax raising powers but has made limited use of them. In these circumstances struggling public services are a choice. We need MSPs who are not afraid to use the powers they have to change Scotland.

Decent services can be properly and fairly funded. A range of options are available to rescue public services from their current overlapping crises. Many of them relate to local, rather than Scottish government.

A better, fairer Scotland must include standing up for local democracy – allowing local government its own freedoms and responsibilities. Giving councils more freedom would improve public finances, diversify the funding base and shift the focus from earned income to excess wealth.

- Increase the rate of Land and Business Transactions Tax (LBTT)
- Increase the Additional Dwelling Supplement – the LBTT charged on second or third or buy to let homes
- Reduce the threshold for higher income tax rates
- Increase the landfill tax from the current UK level
- A local inheritance tax could be introduced using local tax powers in Scotland, provided the revenue went to local government
- Land value uplift taxes could be introduced bringing in a new system of land value capture so that a significant proportion of the uplift in land value from major public infrastructure works is made available to councils to invest in infrastructure and public services. Legislation to allow councils to buy land for housing at its existing use value would make housebuilding budgets go significantly further
- Urgently replace the council tax with a fair property tax

## Local government

There is a crisis across local government services – from services for children to the elderly. Years of budget cuts have stripped away prevention and early help. The Improvement Service – Scotland’s national organisation supporting local government – says ‘staff shortages are being felt to varying degrees across all council services’ and that ‘difficulties are most acute in social care and social work, with over 90% of councils reporting shortages.’

This pushes costs onto other services like the NHS and police who often intervene at crisis point and at greater expense. Instead, increasingly scarce resources are concentrated on meeting statutory duties. But councils are now so strapped for cash that even this becomes a challenge.

- Return powers to local councils and give them more control over their own finances
- Proper resourcing, multi-year budgets and an end to ringfencing
- Review the future of Integration Joint Boards

Underfunding by the Scottish government means many councils are now breaching their statutory duties in areas such as homelessness, additional support needs in schools, and in social care and social work, despite these areas being prioritised in council budgets.

As in other areas of public services, inadequate pay is a major problem. More needs to be done to address the long-term decline in the value of council pay. Council staff have seen the value of their pay fall by 25% over the last decade or so. Councils face problems recruiting staff across many roles.

### Integration joint boards

The creation of Integration Joint Boards a decade ago removed decision-making from elected local councils. This structural reform has not delivered the promised shift towards prevention. It has not improved social care or taken pressure off the NHS. Instead IJBs have become vehicles for delivering cuts, and mainly to local government services. It’s time to review their future.

There are a number of urgent reforms needed for local government to be able to deliver the services people deserve.

### Early learning and childcare (ELC)

Families need high quality early learning and childcare. This requires a highly qualified workforce and remuneration must reflect the skills and qualifications that the staff bring to that work every day. Improvement will come through improving the status, pay and training of ELC staff. This must include time in the working day for training, reflective practice and ongoing professional development.

ELC should be delivered free at the point of delivery in the public sector. This is the most efficient, effective and fair route to both a high quality service and decent terms and conditions for staff. ELC staff need career paths to keep these highly skilled workers in the service.

The current system remains patchy, complex and expensive and is a barrier to work, or leaves women only keeping a toe in the workplace, with little financial gain while their children are young.

Wrap around childcare for school age children is even more patchy and expensive. This needs to change. Parents also need improved flexible working rights and maternity and paternity leave and pay to help them balance work and family life.

## **Schools**

The presumption of mainstreaming has not provided the desired improvement for pupils with additional support needs because of completely inadequate funding and staffing levels, and lack of training and support for staff. Pupils are often in the building but that is not the same as in education. There are rising numbers of ASN pupils, over-stretched resources and cramped and unsuitable learning environments. Too many children are being denied access to education that fits their needs.

Parents should not have to fight to get the additional support their child needs. Lengthy delays for children to access assessment, diagnosis and support from educational psychology, CAMHS and other services. This has been known for years but has not improved.

### **The government must:**

- Provide resources for ASN so we can Get It Right For Every Child
- Invest in proper levels of classroom support – giving children the best start is preventative spend
- Invest in training and support for support staff to ensure children are having their needs met
- Pay for these roles should reflect the job that they do

The epidemic of violence in schools needs to be tackled. UNISON Scotland's annual violence at work survey consistently shows 80% of violent incidents experienced by council workers happen in schools and nurseries and most of those are experienced by education support staff. They need improved training and support; not least, better and more consistent recording of incidents by employers.

## Social work

Social workers, occupational therapists and paraprofessionals work under stressful circumstances with increasing workloads, unfilled vacancies, and with greater inequality and poverty in the community and cuts to wider services.

There is a national recruitment and retention crisis. This is compounded by poor IT systems and reduced access to training.

### UNISON's Charter for Social Work calls for:

- UNISON supports the creation of a National Social Work Agency, but this alone will not solve the problems.
- Service reform requires major investment in the workforce.
- Plan, train and recruit the size of workforce necessary to meet current and projected care needs.
- Investment to deliver relationship-based care and a shift towards a community-based model of social work. This is vital to deliver The Promise and reform the care systems for children and adults.
- Care Management, the process for assessing social care needs, is not fit for purpose and must be reformed.
- There is an urgent need for additional funding for social work services across Scotland and the crisis will worsen unless the workforce issues are addressed.

## Local government budgets have borne the brunt of cuts

The government's failure to properly fund its priorities means that many areas within local government have had disproportionate cuts.

Since 2010/11:

- 26% reduction in culture and leisure spending
- 13% reduction in roads spending
- 25% reduction in planning spending
- 30% reduction in tourism spending
- 23% reduction in corporate support services spending
- 30% reduction in trading standards and environmental health spending
- 39% reduction in street cleaning spending
- 11% reduction in waste service spending

The pressures these cuts have placed on staff to maintain a decent service is enormous.

There is a growing recruitment and retention crisis across local government, particularly in planning, environmental health, trading and building standards. All are vital to our safety, economic growth and wellbeing.

## Social care

Social care is in crisis. The sector struggles to recruit and retain staff because of low pay, insecure, unpredictable work and employers who prioritise cutting costs rather than the wellbeing of service users and staff.

UNISON is campaigning for sectoral bargaining for the contracted-out social care sector. We want social care services that value the workforce, provide fair work and fulfilling careers. We need parity of pay, pensions and terms and conditions and sectoral collective bargaining.

- Deliver promises on sectoral collective bargaining for social care
- Plan the workforce we need for our rapidly growing elderly population
- We want an end to racism in the sector and the exploitation of migrant care workers.
- Create a visa sponsorship scheme for social care run by an independent body to help protect overseas staff from exploitation.
- Build a fully integrated system of health and social care based on common principles, through insourcing and removal of profit from care.

We have seen the launch, and then abandonment, of a Bill to create what was called a National Care Service but was nothing of the sort.

UNISON is campaigning for a real National Care Service, that will kick profit out of care. A service that will be designed through a process of engagement with councils, unions, NHS, service users and their communities to design a bottom-up, grassroots review. It must be based around nationally agreed standards, employment conditions and resourcing, but delivered locally by councils and not-for-profit organisations working in partnership.

The National Care Service we want will be based on the following principles:

- Social care should be fully funded, universal and free at the point of delivery
- For-profit providers should have no place delivering social care for children or adults
- Fair work, decent pay and improved status should be the norm for all care workers

Those who work in care in the private and charitable sector:

- Should be paid based on NHS rates of pay
- Progress to equal pay in two years
- Four grades collectively bargained
- Sick pay, maternity, paternity pay for all workers
- No division on pay or conditions based on visa status
- Safeguards for displaced workers on visas

# Housing

Scotland has a housing emergency. To solve it, the next government must build a minimum of 15,700 extra social homes each year between 2026-2031.

This is an anti-poverty measure and decent affordable housing improves the wellbeing of all citizens.

New starts in the social sector are at the lowest level recorded – only 3,000 in 2024/25. The shortage means house prices and private rents have rocketed, meaning mid-market rents are higher too. Expanding social housing supply is the way to bring private rents down and not just cap the increases.

## We need:

- a mass programme of social house building.
- greater government funding for councils and Registered Social Landlords to convert buildings, buy housing stock, and bring empty homes into use on a bigger scale.
- the next government must reject private build-to-rent as a solution and invest instead in quality social housing, including energy efficiency and adaptations.

Investing in social housing is preventative. It will save money by ending misery. Over £160 million is spent by councils each year on temporary homelessness accommodation. Equivalent to a quarter of the Scottish government’s annual budget for affordable housing.

To join-up housing and social care, and take pressure off the NHS, the government budget for housing aids and adaptations must increase substantially as well as capital funding for councils to upgrade and expand their own residential social care.

For the new private sector rent controls and the new prevention of homelessness duties to work, councils must receive additional funding from the Scottish government.

As a net zero anti-poverty measure, the Scottish government should prevent unaffordable social rent increases by grant funding the energy efficiency ‘retrofitting’ improvements it requires of social landlords.

Government should be harnessing the potential of local government pension schemes, which contain billions of pounds that could be invested in public housing and care, and apprenticeships.

## 2026 UNISON’s year of green activity

UNISON wants commitments to a rapid and just transition from fossil fuels to net zero. Climate change impacts on workers with high temperatures, unsafe conditions during severe weather and high fossil fuel energy bills. UNISON’s Year of Green Activity 2026 is an opportunity to bring our collective strength to influence national governments to make strong commitments—and, crucially, deliver them.

UNISON branches see tangible progress through local green energy initiatives. These successes strengthen our case for sensible investment in environmental action to support a sustainable future, improve working lives and protects jobs by easing long-term pressures on budgets.

## Police staff

Police staff include 999 call takers, emergency dispatchers, scenes of crime officers, custody officers, financial investigators, crime analysts, fingerprint experts, counter-terrorism specialists, cyber-crime investigators, digital forensic staff, CCTV operators and many other roles. These staff are vital to effective policing, tackling crime, and community safety.

Police staff are experiencing unsustainable workloads leading to burnout and stress. Staff are working beyond reasonable limits due to years of cuts and underinvestment.

Workers in area control rooms, custody and information management are particularly affected by severe staff shortages leaving them struggling to maintain essential services.

The Scottish government needs to listen to police staff, who say they are being stretched to the limit

to compensate for systemic weaknesses within Police Scotland. UNISON's views are echoed by other authoritative, independent voices, like Audit Scotland.

Police Scotland's own surveys point to staff feeling overburdened, undervalued, and unsupported. Like so much of our public services, staff are expected to work overtime, stay late, and show unreasonable flexibility, while not being able to take adequate time off.

Stress-related absences are becoming the norm and the situation has reached breaking point. Police Scotland needs funding to recruit and retain the staff it desperately needs.

The incoming Scottish government should act quickly to fix vital services that help protect the public. Any future transformation of the police service must include investment in police staff.

## Migrant workers

A UNISON survey revealed that more than two in five (45%) care workers who came to Scotland from overseas to work in social care companies have experienced racism from colleagues or service users and their families while doing their jobs. Over half (53%) of those targeted didn't report the racist abuse for fear of the consequences.

More than two in five (45%) said their employer treated migrant workers worse than non-migrant workers. Employers have a hold over migrant care staff because they act as sponsor for their visa.

The impact is staff feel they cannot report issues about work conditions in case it affects their immigration status. A third (34%) of care workers were too scared to complain or speak out, and a

fifth (21%) said they cannot turn down overtime or extra shifts, even at short notice.

Without inward migration, Scotland faces a growing labour and skills shortage. Inward migration is especially important for council areas whose working age population is most in decline and economic inactivity relatively high.

Yet migrant workers face higher levels of exploitation than other workers. Any incoming Scottish government must push the UK government for comprehensive visa reform, to include decoupling visa sponsorship from individual employers to sector wide schemes.

# The National Health Service in Scotland

The pandemic exposed fundamental staffing, structural and funding weaknesses in NHS Scotland.

Despite numerous political relaunches and an NHS Recovery Plan which promised to drive our NHS beyond pre-pandemic levels of performance, public confidence is down, complaints are up and media outlets report multiple crisis in our NHS.

Here as in other areas of the public sector, there are issues of underfunding. This is compounded by the NHS being the service of last resort.

Cuts to addiction services, housing, education, public health, and policing create demand further down the line - in doctors surgeries, Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments and hospital wards.

In turn, the NHS is dependent on other public bodies and agencies. UNISON has consistently accepted the need to reform our NHS but we can only do so if that reform is underpinned by high quality public services.

The inter relationship between social care, social work and primary care needs to be better recognised.

Currently investment in public health, addiction, debt management, adult and children's mental health and carers services is inconsistent. Often a service is cut for the benefit of balancing funds elsewhere.

The annual winter crisis is a weekly calamity. NHS staff and their colleagues in social work and social care are expected to do more with less resources.

The scandal of delayed discharge is a case in point. Almost 2,000 Scots could be cared for in their own homes or wider social care are stuck in an NHS bed, at a far greater net cost to the public purse.

Delayed discharge directly impacts on patient flow resulting in longer waits in Accident and Emergency or patients sitting for hours in ambulances in car parks or in corridor care. It is also accepted that delayed discharge is bad for patients' health.

This highlights the necessity to change the current modelling assumptions which are used to resource our acute hospitals, current bed modelling assumes a maximum patient stay of three days, set in the context of an assumption that there will be continued improvements in health inequalities indicators.

There are many such revisions which are necessary not least a greater emphasis on public health and community health. For example, better community mental health and addiction services would mean less crisis and less pressure on A&E departments. We need to invest in primary care to improve the health and wealth of our nation.

Evidence shows you can't turn-off funding for acute services and re-direct the resources to community services. We need NHS reform that recognises the demand on services and redirects resources to fit community need, not to balance the budget.

Investing in primary care and community health is essential though it is wider and more complex than simply investing in GPs.

A reimagined GP service could do much more, such as minor procedures: wart/mole removal, minor x-rays, arthritis treatment, knees, foot and hand injuries and rehab through physio and other similar services. Many GP services are nurse-led and that could be expanded. It would though require a fair work agreement to ensure that GP staff are on an equal footing with NHS workers.

Scotland's safe staffing legislation has failed to deliver. A UNISON survey of NHS staff affected by safe staffing revealed:

- Less than 15% of staff responding to the survey felt that their employer was doing enough to tackle safe staffing issues.
- More than 85% did not. It goes without saying that failing in the implementation of the Safe Staffing Act must be addressed.

UNISON has consistently accepted the need to reform our NHS, but this can only be done safely if underpinned by comprehensive workforce planning and by dealing with pay reform for NHS workers (as identified in the 2023/24 pay deal but still outstanding). We cannot simply keep expecting NHS workers to meet the challenges of an aging population with an outdated approach to reward and recognition.

Like the rest of the workforce in Scotland, the NHS workforce is ageing, and this situation needs to be considered. Planned increases to the state retirement age, gender inequality in the pension scheme will all have an impact. We need to deal with pension inequality, reduce the age of retirement from the scheme, and build on retire and return.

## Paramedics and the Scottish Ambulance Service

Corridor care has been pushed into car parks as paramedics and A&E staff increasingly treat patients in ambulances stacked outside hospitals, because wards are full.

UNISON research highlights that NHS staff find it distressing that patients can be stuck for long periods in the back of ambulances – often for hours.

Paramedics want to be out answering calls, helping people with emergencies.

Over 126,000 ambulances waited over an hour outside Scottish hospitals in 2025, and over 9,000 were sat there for four hours or more.

The waits severely compromise the quality of care, placing vulnerable patients in unsafe and undignified situations. Ambulance staff work around the clock to save patients' lives, but the incessant pressure is taking its toll on them too. Not getting a proper break on a 12-hour shift, or knowing when your shift ends, has led to high levels of stress.

As the state retirement age rises, these pressures are contributing to higher sickness absence among paramedics. They deserve parity with workers in other blue light services, such as police officers and fire fighters who can retire at 55 or 60.

UNISON wants a maximum one-hour limit on ambulance wait times, guaranteed rest-breaks, and a meaningful early-retirement option for staff.

## AI and technology in the NHS

Currently automation and AI are usually discussed in terms of the removal of admin and clerical staff and patients – with little thought as to the knock-on effect on the staff who are then left dealing with a machine.

UNISON understands the need to reform our NHS, but a far more sophisticated approach to AI is required. AI could be beneficial. Reading x-rays, mammograms and other diagnostic tests could significantly speed up results (particularly

for non-emergency/urgent referrals). Use of these tools would release resources for more complex cases and improved direct patient care. Automated surgery (DaVinci) could be a welcome addition in respect of clinical efficiency and patient outcomes but requires significant up-front capital investment. We should introduce these new ways of working with a technology agreement that underpins a just transition.

## Centralising services in the NHS

An approach that will contribute little to improving our NHS is one based on centralising services. Reform that is simply about merging organisations / special boards or re-drawing boundaries does nothing to address real issues. Before any such changes could be seen as worthwhile, a comprehensive case has to be made that puts patient care at the centre of service design.

Almost 17% of Scots live and work in a rural land mass. For them public services and the NHS are very different. The Scottish government’s National Centre for Remote and Rural Healthcare is a welcome structural initiative. However, to date it has failed to resolve many of the key challenges that NHS workers and communities experience.

Too often, service redesigns are simply a headline for closure, forcing local citizens to travel further and further afield for healthcare.

It’s not just high-level clinical posts that can be hard to fill, health boards have experienced challenges recruiting and retaining catering workers, estates and maintenance and healthcare workers.

Increased travel distances in communities, which have higher costs of living and their own unique affordable housing crisis add to acute recruitment and retention challenges in circumstances where NHS wages are not competitive with the local labour market.

- End corridor care and make reporting of care in non-standard areas mandatory
- Invest in workforce planning and a modern reward and recognition package
- Fair work commitment for GP and community-based staff delivering NHS services
- New technology and just transition agreement for the NHS
- Realistic bed modelling and resource allocation underpinned by a fair transition agreement
- The NHS workforce should be developed through greater investment in education, training and staff development, alongside building capacity from within existing staff and academic structures.

# Further and higher education

Colleges and universities are anchor institutions in local economies. They educate the future workforce, provide lifelong learning, research and innovate, and tackle inequality.

## Post-16 education

In an economy still beset by a cost of living crisis, where insecure and precarious employment are rife the need for people to be able to develop their skills and retrain has never been greater.

Yet Scotland's tertiary education system is in crisis. Problems have been allowed to develop in these sectors leaving vital institutions struggling to survive.

The next Scottish government must invest in a workforce capable of meeting the changing economic challenges. It must make investing in our post 16 education system a priority.

## Colleges

Last year colleges delivered less teaching to fewer students, having seen a 20 per cent real-terms funding reduction over the last five years.

This has put pressure on college staff who are also still awaiting the conclusion of the national job evaluation scheme. Some staff are owed back pay going back to 2018.

The Scottish government has accepted that they, not colleges, have responsibility for paying out this money – but have not yet produced a mechanism for how they will do so.

## Universities

Meanwhile near bankrupt universities are being bailed out by government. It is not fair that attempts to balance the books are being made by making the lower paid staff pay for the mistakes of top managers - who are often very well paid indeed.

We need to harmonise staff terms and conditions across further education, restore and increase funding to tertiary education and keep higher education free with no tuition fees.

# Scottish Water and energy

Few services are quite as essential as water and energy. The Scottish government should have a strong community wealth building strategy, instead, these services are increasingly left to the market.

## Water

Scottish Water is being privatised by stealth. Today, just 25% of the workforce is directly employed by the company. Senior management at Scottish Water are pursuing a strategy where increasing amounts of its maintenance and repair work is outsourced to private contractors rather than carried out by their own staff. It is an approach that delivers neither higher quality nor value for customers – although some large private contractors have done very well.

We have opposed moves toward gradual privatisation through the use of contractors, PPP schemes and non-domestic competition. The ambition that was promised of Scotland as a Hydro Nation has been neglected. There is a need to be bolder in developing the natural resource that a public water service gives Scotland. Renewing infrastructure through public investment will create jobs. Those working in Scottish Water are a skilled and dedicated workforce and should be rewarded on that basis.

Meanwhile people dependent on Scottish Water – and that’s all of us – aren’t seeing improvements in the service and the in house Scottish Water workforce is being run down. It’s an intolerable situation and has to be brought to an end

The deliberate – and costly – outsourcing of essential maintenance and supply work is seeing the highest senior chief executives reward themselves with obscene salary packages, while ordinary staff struggle for inflation-proofed pay deals.

## Energy

The energy sector is transitioning towards renewables. UNISON supports a balanced energy policy which will include a range of different sources of power. Government at every level needs to take forward the challenge of transforming the energy sector to deliver a just transition to a low-carbon energy system. This could address fuel poverty and deliver jobs with a new industrial base.

Mainly overseas-owned multinational corporations are developing both on and offshore wind, and rather than seeing the creation of a new industrial base, communities pay the price. We need to reform in the energy market to deliver more certainty for consumers and workers, this should include more public ownership.

If we had a state-owned energy company, it could have sold the electricity from offshore wind to the grid and retained operating profits.

Instead, the 17 ScotWind offshore wind projects were auctioned off to huge corporations and the Scottish public is estimated to be losing between £3.5 billion and £5.5 billion each year – about a tenth of the entire Scottish government budget – which could have been invested in the NHS and public services.

# Join us and defend public services

Candidates will know that if they want the votes of UNISON members they are going to have to work for them.

Elections are an opportunity to hold parties and candidates to account on their record – but also to influence them as to what they should do in future.

## Join us and get active

Put our concerns about services and the jobs of those that deliver them in front of those who are looking for your vote. Challenge those that want to be elected about what they will do to improve public services and invest in the staff.

UNISON Scotland has thousands of members – that's lots of potential votes.

- Write to local candidates with key branch / workplace concerns and ask how they intend to improve public services.
- Talk to your friends and colleagues and encourage them to join UNISON's campaigns.
- Hold hustings meetings – invite candidates so UNISON members can talk to them face to face.
- Use UNISON's briefings and questions to challenge canvassers on the doorstep.
- Share our campaign materials across social media.

UNISON branches and sectors will have particular concerns, but here are some questions that might be useful, or you can adapt.

- How will you close the Scottish government funding gap without reducing services?
- Do you think the public sector needs to be smaller or bigger?
- If you want to invest in public services, how will you pay for it?
- Would you vote against the outsourcing of public services?
- Do you think the private sector should be more involved in public services or not?
- What are the challenges for public services and how would you tackle them?

UNISON Scotland will publish *Influencer Briefings* over the election. Please read and share them.

Keep up to date at [unison-scotland.org](http://unison-scotland.org)



**Public services:  
the heart of a fairer  
Scotland**

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