

Social Care Reform, Funding & Access

(England)

September 2024

Older people should be able to expect responsive, person-centred, high quality social care services to meet their needs wherever they live. Services should be based on universal and rapid care assessments that are fully integrated with other key services.

Adult social care helps people who are older or living with disability or physical or mental illness to live independently and stay safe and well. For older people this usually means ‘personal care’ – support with washing, dressing, and preparing meals or eating. Under the Care Act 2014, the State has a duty to support people needing care, but those seeking support will have their finances assessed, and most people will have to pay some or all of the cost.

For many people, paying for care can result in the loss of their home and assets that have been built up throughout their lives. Those without the means to pay for their care, or whose assets have been depleted, are left to rely upon packages of care provided by Local Authorities, which may not fully meet their needs. Yet it is harder than ever to access support through a Local Authority. 377,580 people were provided with no services in 2022/23, up 13.6% on the pre-pandemic year of 2019/20 (332,165 people). Age UK analysis shows that 2 million older people are living with unmet needsⁱ.

Unpaid care from family and friends bridges the often considerable gap. New research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation predicts that there will be almost a million more unpaid carers by 2035, and that rates of unpaid care intensity are rising.ⁱⁱ

Successive Governments have pledged to ‘fix’ social care, but thus far none have delivered the change that is needed, with proposed charging reforms first delayed then abandonedⁱⁱⁱ, and funding for the care workforce withdrawn^{iv}. Care Deserts^v are an ongoing issue in some parts of the country, and while spending on adult Social Care is increasing year on year, the number of clients receiving long term care is decreasing, with 44,950 fewer older people aged 65 and over receiving long term care now than in 2015-16^{vi}.

The current funding model is clearly unsustainable. With an ageing population and growing demand for care, the Health Foundation^{vii} estimates a funding pressure of £8.3bn over the next ten years just to stand still.

Our annual polling^{viii} and survey highlights the difficulties that older people report to us with accessing care and support, with almost a fifth (19% - 4.9 million) saying they were concerned about their ability to access a home care worker or carer. Survey respondents told us of the increased costs of care, of being let down by care agencies, of having care packages reduced, and of a lack of continuity in their care. Staying where we are is not an option. Poor access to care leads to unmet needs, costly avoidable admissions to hospital and delayed discharge, breakdown in unpaid carer arrangements, poverty, and misery for older people and their families.

Public Policy Proposals

- As a precursor for reform, the Government must first prioritise stabilising the care system. It should ensure that local authorities and commissioners are adequately funded and resourced to assess need and arrange care & support quickly, and to invest in innovation, early intervention and prevention
- The Government must also stabilise the care market, funding Local Authorities and commissioners to a level that ensures a sustainable rate for providers of home care and care homes of all sizes.
- Local plans must provide for a supply of modern, energy efficient residential & nursing care, together with extra care and retirement living to meet the needs of an ageing population in every part of the country, however their care is funded.
- Any programme of reform must address the variation in access to home care and residential care. Packages of care to meet the specific needs of each individual should be available to all, wherever they live in England.
- The Government should deliver a system which supports people to live independently in their own homes and communities for as long as they wish to. Councils, Housing associations the NHS, VCSE and Allied health professionals must work in genuine partnership to deliver tailored support – whether that is long term personal care, housing adaptations, short- term care and rehabilitation following a period of illness or accident, or end of life care.
- Local Government and Integrated Care Systems should receive multiyear funding settlements and be focused on longer-term commissioning.
- The system should support and value unpaid carers – delivering guaranteed respite care, support to continue working and improved legal rights to time off for caring, and a benefits system that does not disincentivise work
- Government must tackle the workforce shortages that continue to trouble the sector, devising an improved pay for a system of registration, pay progression and general working conditions comparable with those working in the NHS.
- Reforming Continuing Healthcare (CHC) must be included in any broader programme of social care reform since it is vital component of the care system for those with pronounced health needs, and the current CHC system is demonstrably not fit for purpose.

Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money, health and care, housing and communities, and equalities issues. See <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policy-positions/> for more information.

ⁱ Age UK (2024), *The State of Health and Care of Older People in England 2024*

ⁱⁱ [The future of care needs: a whole systems approach | Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(jrf.org.uk\)](https://www.jrf.org.uk)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Chancellor statement on public spending inheritance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

^{iv} [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](https://www.parliament.uk)

^v [Social care system is failing older people | Discover | Age UK](https://www.ageuk.org.uk)

^{vi} [Adult Social Care Activity and Finance Report, England, 2022-23 - NHS England Digital](https://www.nhs.uk)

^{vii} [Adult social care funding pressures - The Health Foundation](https://www.healthfoundation.org.uk)

^{viii} [struggle-to-be-seen \(ageuk.org.uk\)](https://www.ageuk.org.uk)