BRIEFING: The Programme for Government in Scotland 2025-26

May 2025

## Introduction

On 6th May 2025, the Scottish Government unveiled its Programme for Government (PfG) 2025-26, including significant developments that will impact social work practice across the country.

The Programme for Government is usually launched in Autumn, but the First Minister brought it forward in order to allow a year for implementation before the Scottish Parliamentary Elections next May. The way in which Governments present the numbers and finance allocation throughout the Programme can often be difficult to follow; announcements rarely detail the current and the future amounts together. While the PfG explicitly acknowledges that many of the issues that are paramount for the people of Scotland are the result of increasing inequalities there is little in the programme that explicitly addresses causes rather than symptoms.

The formation of the National Social Work Agency alongside the other major reforms in the PfG potentially represent a defining moment for the profession albeit that these changes arrive during particularly challenging times. However, it is disappointing to see little in the programme that addresses social work specifically beyond the Agency’s formation.

## Addressing child poverty

The SNP made a manifesto commitment to address child poverty in Scotland at the last Scottish Election. That commitment translated into increasing and expanding the Scottish Child Payment, a commitment to providing free school meals and investing in employability support for low -income parents. However, despite Scotland being the only nation in the UK to see any significant decline in child poverty during the last two decades, those gains have been steady lost[: Joseph Rowntree Foundation](https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2024#_-poverty-rates-and-progress-on-targets) analysis suggest that 21% or 1 in 5 of children were living with poverty in 2013, and in 2023 that figure had increased to 24%, or 1 in 4.

The mechanisms that the PfG proposes to address this are universal rather than targeted which ultimately will not address the relative gap between the richest and poorest children in Scotland. For example, the mechanism for addressing poverty in the plan are primarily through education (£200m for the Attainment Challenge and £29m for additional support needs staff).

The plans also highlight public service reform (strategy to be published June 25) and increases to the Scottish Child Payment as drivers for change, although those changes may not be sufficient to return child poverty to 2013 levels, never mind attain the target of [10% by 2030](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c04zw32qg06o#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20the%20Scottish%20Parliament,less%20than%2010%25%20by%202030.).

The PfG also describes increasing funding to provide income maximisation and debt advice. A key political investment to provide a universal Pension Age Winter Heating Payment from Winter 2025 is included as well as launching the Carer’s Additional Person Payment for people supporting more than one person.

Key elements in the Programme impacting social work

## 1. National Social Work Agency

Spring 2026 marks the establishment of Scotland's National Social Work Agency, a key moment for the profession. Given that a quarter of social workers leave within six years of qualifying, this initiative has the challenging job of revitalising social work’s professional identity. The PfG indicates that this will be done through enhanced learning pathways and standardised development frameworks, but we expect to see and hear more during the agency’s establishment during the shadow year that began on the 1st of April 2025.

Critical success factors for the agency are dependent on social workers engaging in consultation processes to ensure that frontline experiences inform the Agency's structure. The current workforce crisis means that sustainable workloads and improved retention of experienced staff will be central to the Agency's mission, to ultimately strengthen the profession's voice and recognition.

## 2. Child protection and care experience

The PfG proposes the Children and Young People (Care) (Scotland) Bill, scheduled for introduction before summer recess 2025, to transform Scotland's care system. Care leavers will receive a £2,000 one-off payment from April 2026, while a new vision for kinship care is expected by year's end.

[The Scottish Recommended Allowance](https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-recommended-allowance-for-foster-and-kinship-carers-information-for-carers-and-professionals/) for eligible foster and kinship carers will see long called for increases in financial support, alongside measures to reduce commercial profit-making in children's services. It is notable that a similar approach for adult services is not also being considered.

These initiatives acknowledge the disadvantages faced by care-experienced young people and the central role that social workers play in advocating for service users. The PfG’s proposed transitions framework to support ‘moving on’ from care to adulthood (see the Care Inspectorate [thematic review](https://www.careinspectorate.com/index.php/news/7820-transitions-for-care-experienced-young-people-a-thematic-review)) represents an opportunity to centre young people's experiences in policy and practice, ensuring their voices are central to any developments that affect them.

## 3. Whole family support

Integrated family support models are expanding across Scotland, with [Fairer Futures Partnerships](https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-rights-wellbeing-impact-assessment-crwia-fairer-futures-partnerships/) extending into Shetland, North Lanarkshire, and Fife.

The Wise Group's [relational mentoring](https://www.thewisegroup.co.uk/relational-mentoring/) programme will also support 2,000 additional households supported by new investment from Scottish Government.

In addition third sector organisations, which increasingly are filling gaps in provision traditionally provided by social work, gain long called for multi-year funding via the [Fairer Funding pilot](https://www.gov.scot/news/fairer-funding-for-charities/), intended to provide stability to the sector.

## 4. Health and social care integration

May 2025 will see the inaugural meeting of the National Care Service Advisory Board, giving people with lived experience a central role in identifying priorities for improvements to social care. Meanwhile, Single Authority Models where a single elected body is responsible for delivering all public services within a specific geographic area, will take shape in Argyll and Bute, Orkney, and Western Isles (see this model [here](https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/sites/default/files/imce/Committees/Policy%20and%20Resources%20Committee/2024/September/G-7B-Single-Authority-Model-Statement-of-Benefits.pdf)).

The key priority The Government sees for integration is the need to improve discharges from hospital. Specialised frailty teams are therefore planned for every core A and E/Emergency Department by summer 2025 (larger Accident & Emergency services that typically provide a 24-hour consultant-led service). These teams will support frail patients with complex needs with wrap-around care to return home or into appropriate care settings promptly. In addition, [Hospital at Home](https://www.nhsinform.scot/care-support-and-rights/health-rights/access/hospital-at-home/) beds will expand from [495](https://ihub.scot/news/acute-adult-and-older-people-hospital-at-home-programme-report-202324/) in 2024 to at least 2,000 by December 2026, supporting care closer to home with the intention of reducing hospital pressures.

We anticipate that social workers will have to navigate evolving governance structures and shifting accountability frameworks as a result, particularly in pilot areas.

While the primary concern in the programme is on earlier intervention and prevention for medical conditions earlier in life, acknowledging that these are also symptoms of inequality, the focus is exclusively on health interventions: improving access to treatment of mental health for children, adolescents and adults, and reducing ‘mental health demands’ on police officers. There is a disappointing lack of attention paid in the PfG to the inequalities that lead to demand for these services, or the role that social work, social care and third sector organisations might play in addressing them.

## 5. Mental health and substance use support

Mental health services will receive £123.5 million recurring funding dedicated to clearing backlogs and meeting treatment standards. The [NHS 24 Mental Health Hub](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-support/mental-health-services-at-nhs-24/) will expand by December 2025 to provide digitally enabled psychological interventions for early treatment. Community-based early intervention will receive £30 million until 2027. The PfG also highlights the [multi-agency guidance for responses to psychiatric emergencies](https://www.gov.scot/publications/multi-agency-partnership-approach-distress-framework-collaboration/pages/7/) which was launched in February 2025.

Substance use services gain £2.5 million in additional funding, including £1 million specifically to support mothers and babies. Additional funding for rehabilitation will increase by 50%, increasing the number of places from [513](https://www.gov.scot/publications/residential-rehabilitation-bed-capacity-scotland-september-2024/pages/2/) in 2024 to 650 beds, with an ambition to reach 1,000 placements annually by 2026. The PfG proposes the full implementation of the [Medication Assisted Treatment Standards](https://www.gov.scot/publications/medication-assisted-treatment-mat-standards-scotland-access-choice-support/) alongside a new national specification for substitute prescribing..

## 6. Digital transformation and public service reform

By the end of 2025, an initial version of the health and social care app will launch with £12 million invested in its development. This forms part of a wider 'personalised digital health and social care service,' with progressive implementation across Scotland thereafter.

The Public Service Reform strategy will be published in June 2025 focusing on streamlining service delivery, developing data-driven approaches, and supporting joined-up services. This reform aims to digitise and automate back-office functions, consolidate the separate efforts of public bodies where appropriate, reduce duplication, and to shift the focus toward prevention-first approaches. Third sector organisations are prominent in the strategy as key delivery partners within this framework.

## Further information

For comprehensive details on the Programme for Government 2025-26, please visit: [www.gov.scot/programme-for-government](http://www.gov.scot/programme-for-government)