# Stirling Carers Hustings 2026

## Full Transcript

This is a full transcript of the event on Tuesday 14th April. While this transcript has been checked for errors, some may remain. A summary of this transcript and audio recording of the event on are available on request.

**Keri Moore - CEO, Stirling Carers Centre**

Hello. Good evening everybody and thank you for coming along this evening. My name is Keri for those of you who don't know me and I'm the CEO here at Stirling Carers Centre. So on behalf of the centre I'd like to warmly welcome you to this hustings event ahead of the forthcoming Scottish elections. This is the first time that Stirling Carers Centre has hosted such an event, so we're really pleased to be creating a space for discussion, questions and engagement or issues that matter to carers and our wider community. As an organisation, we are politically neutral this evening and our role tonight is simply to support informed conversation and respectful debate. I'd like to thank the staff who came along this evening, and a huge thank you to Carley, who has led on the planning and organisation of this event. A great deal of work has gone on behind the scenes, and we're very grateful for her support in doing this. Her passion and energy has been kind of outstanding, so thank you, Carley. So, before... Laura will be taking photos this evening. So if anybody doesn't want to be in a photo, if they can just let Laura know and she'll make sure you're not in them. And just a quick housekeeping points. If the alarm sounds, which we don't expect it to, Lee is going to come and meet us and help us come out of the building. So he'll direct us calmly and safely out and just follow him. Toilets are located outside and just along to the right. And we'd ask that mobile phones are switched off if possible or on silent. I'm mindful that some people may need to be made contacted, so that's fine, just put them on silent. So thank you all again for being here tonight and for taking the time to take part in our democratic process. And I hope you find the evening informative and engaging. And I'll hand you over to Gina, who's going to be our chair this evening. And a massive thank you for taking on this role this evening. Thank you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

And Keri, I'm right in saying that it's going to be audio recorded as well from now forwards. Yeah. So let's mind our P's and Q's. Thanks, Keri. So yeah. My name is Gina Alexander. I have the great privilege to be a vice chair of Stirling Carers Centre and great to be hosting, chairing this hustings tonight. I want to say thank you to all of you. Add my thanks to carers, to, you know, you've all got busy lives and I really appreciate you being here. To the candidates who I'll now introduce, on my right-hand side we have Stephen Kerr from the Conservative Party. We have Amanda Clarke from Liberal Democrats. We have Kainde Manji from Labour. Welcome. And on my left-hand side, we have Rachel Wright from Reform UK. We have Andrew Adam from the Scottish Greens. And we have Alyn Smith from SNP. So welcome all of you. Thanks for coming out tonight. So just a few words from me about how the session tonight will run. I wrote these after the leaders debate the other night. So forgive me if I sound a bit schoolmamish, but so yes, so it's a structured discussion where questions will be asked, have been asked by the audience and some people will read their own questions. I will read them on behalf of people in the audience or carers we have written in and the candidates will have the opportunity to respond to those. So it is not a back and forth debate as such, but it's my role to make sure that everything remains fair, focused and respectful. And that's what I'm expecting from everybody in the room, really. Respect, you know, audience respect candidates, candidates respect audience and each other. And that also, for me, very much means not talking over each other. Everybody will be given, every candidate will be given the opportunity for an opening statement. And if there is time, a closing statement, they'll also be given a time limit to each response. And where disagreement is in fact inevitable and inappropriate, you need to do that within your own time frame and not take up other people's space. The audience have placed their questions and they want to hear the responses that you are making to them. So your answers, please, should be clear and directly address the questions asked. This is not an opportunity for rehearsed statements. We're here for meaningful, relevant responses. I've already mentioned time limits. Carley, as you can see at the front, we can all see Carley the timekeeper. Thank you, Carley. Opening statements will be a maximum of two minutes for each candidate. I will give you a time check at one minute 30. Responses will be limited to 90 seconds with a time check at 60 and I will intervene if necessary to keep us on schedule and to

ensure fairness to all. We have had almost 50 questions. Don't worry, we're not going to ask you 50 questions. Carley and the team have done a great job of condensing those. But so we might not be able to offer you all the opportunity to respond to every question, but we will ensure that you are able to respond to an equal number of questions. And finally, tonight's focus is on unpaid carers. That's why you're all in the room, yes? Good. Just thought I'd check that. And we expect all contributions to stay to that topic. And if responses drift away, I'll bring them back. At the end, if we have time, we will open up to the floor for questions. So everybody clear and happy? Good. So we will start then with opening statements. I'm going to ask you, Stephen, to start with your two minutes. I'll give you a time check at 1.30. You can. Yeah.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Is it on? Is it on? Yes, on. It's on. Right. Okay, this is really going to stop us interrupting each other, isn't it? If only my one microphone was the thing. Listen, Stephen Kerr, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, thank you so much for being here tonight. And thank you to the Stirling Kerr Centre for organising this event, because as I was discussing earlier with one of you, this is only one of two, I think, local hustings during the course of our election campaign, which is quite different from the campaigns we've had in the past in Stirling constituency. And I know that COVID changed a great deal. And one of the things that's changed, sadly, is the number of opportunities that we as candidates get to sit together and share each other's differing points of view. Can I also take this opportunity to, and I mean this sincerely, thank my political opponents who are here tonight. It takes a little bit of courage, frankly, to put your name on a ballot paper and to stand up and speak and stand up for something that you believe in. And I would urge you all to consider the fact that we actually do all respect each other. I have no doubt that all of my fellow politicians on the platform tonight want a better Scotland. They want a Scotland where people's lives are improved. They want our country to be the very best it can be. But you will respect, I hope, the fact that we see how to get there quite differently. And so we may disagree. And sometimes the public get put off by the fact that politicians will disagree with each other and sometimes with great passion. But that's simply because we sincerely want the best for our country. We want the best for you and for all of your families and all of those for whom you have caring responsibilities. So I will simply say this, thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for the questions, however many of the 50 we managed to get through. And again, thank you to my political opponents, the candidates who are sitting with us on this platform.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Amanda.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Okay, good evening everyone. My name's Amanda Clark and in my spare respite time, I'm the Scottish Liberal Democrat candidate for Perthshire South and Kinross-shire. I'm also on the mid Scotland and Fife regional list and I'm a trustee of Shared Care Scotland. Like you, I'm an unpaid carer. When I'm not campaigning, I'm caring for our 23 year old learning disabled son. So I know what we go through every day. Our tireless dedication to our vulnerable loved ones saves the Scottish Government 16 billion a year, but we're often forgotten, ignored, and our health and welfare needs are not taken seriously. I'm proud to be standing for the Liberal Democrats because we're the party that care for carers. Our leader, Ed Davey, has been a carer all his life. And it was our Lib Dem MP Wendy Chamberlain, whose Private Members Bill brought about the Carers Leave Act, securing A week's unpaid leave for those with caring responsibilities. In the Scottish Budget 25-26, we won the right for family carers to earn more without having financial support withdrawn. And this year in our Scottish manifesto, we are pledging A 400 pound uplift to carers support payment. Our daughter was a young carer. This had a huge impact on her early years. We're calling for a young carers lead in all schools, colleges and universities and compulsory training for teachers and educationalists to support them. But thanks to Lib Dems on Fife Council, a pilot programme has been launched to see how young carers role can be created in schools across the region. We couldn't We want to keep our son at home and we couldn't do this without the support of some wonderful paid carers. I hope I have already done enough to convince you that Scottish Liberal Democrats are the party of carers. While other parties talk the talk on carers, we have already walked the walk on carers. Thank you for everything you are doing.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Okay, Kainde, welcome.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

Thank you. Hello, everybody. My name's Kainde. It is such a privilege to be here and to be able to have this opportunity to listen to you and answer some of your questions tonight. I'm not a career politician. My background is firmly within the voluntary sector and within academia. I spent eight years working in dementia, working initially at the University of Stirling and then later as head of dementia for Age Scotland. And I had the immense privilege during that time to speak to hundreds of carers directly about their experiences, including during the pandemic. And it was listening to those stories and seeing how very, very far apart the rhetoric of policy on paper is from your lived realities that made me want to put myself in this position to stand today. I am also an unpaid carer and that was quite something for me to come to terms with. It took me two or three years to actually identify as an unpaid carer despite having spent so much of my career working with unpaid carers. I care for my 10-year-old son, sorry, my eight-year-old son, who is undiagnosed autistic. He has been on a waiting list for 3 1/2 years waiting for an autism diagnosis. And my 10-year-old is a young carer for him. And we are both registered with Stilling Carers Centre. And I do just want to pay tribute to Stilling Carers Centre for the immense support we have received from them over the years, particularly Zaff. So this isn't about politics for me. This is about our lived reality, and it is about the difference that we all know needs to happen, and that we have been told again and again was going to happen, but hasn't yet. And it's my priority, if I am elected, to make sure that we do deliver for unpaid carers in Scotland.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Okay, Rachel, are you on? Yeah, on you go.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

Is it working?

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Yeah.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

Hi, everybody. My name is Rachel Wright. I am the Reform UK candidate for the Stirling seat, and I'm delighted and thankful to be invited here this evening to speak to you all. I'm not a career politician at all, and I'm not a carer either, so I'll just put my hand up and admit that freely. But this is a sort of issue that's very close to my heart. And I came and had a meeting with Stirling Carers last week to try and get under the bonnet and explain, understand a little bit more. So this is very much a listening exercise for me. You're the guys who are the experts in the field as far as I'm concerned. So I just wanted to open with that. I'd like to start by saying something very simple and that is that unpaid carers are the backbone of our society. You guys do extraordinary things, often quietly, often without recognition, and very often at your own personal cost. Too many of you must feel that the system works against you, however. You're penalised if you try to earn a little more. You're left to pick up the pieces when the health and social care don't join up. And you're expected to carry a burden that should be shared, in my view, and that's not right. What reform offers is a change in approach to almost everything, in fact. But in this case, we want to make sure that work always pays. That underpins almost every aspect of our manifesto. But in this case, we want to ensure that no carer is ever worse off by working more. We want to push power and funding back for local services back to local areas, decentralise it so that your support and funding actually reflects the real lives of you here in Stirling. And we need to fix the blockages in the NHS and social care system, which are putting more and more pressure back onto you that they should be absorbing. So for us and for me, this is about fairness, it's about dignity, and it's about respect.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. Andrew.

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew. I'm here from the Scottish Greens. I am #7 on the regional list. So if we get maybe 60% of the regional vote, then I'll be one of your next MSPs. Chances are probably not. But we can dream, right? So we've got a really caring panel here. And we can say that in more ways than one. Like caring, the clues in the name caring comes from a place of love and duty. But

that can put a huge strain on your relationships and I want to take a moment just to acknowledge that because it can be really exhausting for people and we need to provide as much support as possible because ultimately it's something that many of us will go through throughout our lives. We will be carers, sometimes we will be carers and we will be cared for simultaneously things like disabilities and conditions that require care can vary from day-to-day and week to week. I really struggle with the idea of defining as an unpaid carer, but I am. And that's a really difficult thing to explain to people, that one week you might not have any responsibilities, so to speak, but at a phone call, suddenly everything could change. And that is a huge mental burden to carry, as well as the kind of the physical work you have to do. There's the mental load, the endless life admin, whether that's dealing with motability or access to work, managing your healthcare appointments. It's just, it can be emotionally exhausting. So I'm really grateful that this session is happening tonight. I was delighted to be sent to the National Carers Organisations joint manifesto. And today the Scottish Greens launched their manifesto. I'm delighted to say the vast majority of the points within the carers manifesto are covered either directly or indirectly within the Scottish Greens manifesto. And we will be doing all we can to support carers come the 8th of May. Thank you very much. Thanks, Andrew.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Last but not least, Alyn.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Gina, thanks very much and thank you all to coming along tonight on a night when you could be doing other things because the democratic process, I think we'd all agree, is really important. If COVID taught us anything, it's that who represents you matters, who's making decisions on your behalf really matters. And in recent events in the world as well, it's that everything is connected to everything else. The fact that a war, an illegal war in Iran is impacting upon all of our fuel prices here in Scotland is something that really matters, and the world's a scary place, and who's making decisions for you really, really counts. So I'm really proud to be your SNP candidate. I live in Stirling, I live in Stirling in St Ninians with my husband, and we all walk the same streets in this city. We all walk the same streets in this region. We all want to see the place do well. And I'm proud to be the SNP candidate because the SNP government has proven that we've put carers at the heart of policy making. A number of changes that we've implemented, we created the carer support payment that recognises the specific position of carers. Now that's work in progress. There's more to be done, but we've done it. We've got the carers allowance supplement, which means that 577 pounds better off carers in Scotland than elsewhere. We've implemented a grant for young carers, so that 16 to 18 year olds, they've received 1.6 million. Now these are our taxis coming back, but these are our taxis looking after people who need it, because I believe that community is about looking after people who need it. So we've also got the short breaks fund, which is 8 million pounds a year. And after the legislation that was just passed last year, the Care Scotland Act amendment, we have got a legal right for carers to access respite care and a legal right to a break, because I think that's really important. So even within the limited powers of devolution, and remember we have a devolved parliament in Scotland, we're not independent. Scotland is a rich country, but it doesn't feel like it is sometimes. I want to see all the assets of our rich country go to look after all of us as a community, and that's why your vote matters at this election. Thank you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Great. Okay, so thank you everybody for keeping to time. That's a good start. So we are going to come to questions now, and just to give you the heads up, Moira Carmichael, wherever you are, we're going to come to you next. I'm going to ask a question first of the candidates. So the National Carers Organisations of Scotland want to ensure that unpaid carers are supported and they want at least 25% of Carers Act funding to local support organisations in addition to the funding that they currently receive. So At Stirling Carers, I know we're never sure how much of the total budget that we are receiving to deliver the services that are received. So my question on behalf of Stirling Carers to all of you is how will you ensure that 25% is reached and how will you ensure that there is transparency about how that funding is spent locally? Stephen, I'm going to come to you first.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Look, can you hear me without the microphone? Look, I'm going to be quite straightforward about this. We do have a public finance problem in Scotland. The reality is that the Auditor General, Audit Scotland, have made it clear that whoever the government is after May 7th, they will face very difficult

challenges and very difficult decisions about spending priorities. So when we talk about increasing sums of money that are currently being spent, the reality is that Scotland faces a choice at this election. The choice between emphasising and putting a tight focus on growing our economy so that we can expand the tax base and increase our tax revenues to be able to afford our public services. Or a choice around taxation. Do we put taxes up but we know that that's a brake on that economic growth that we need? Or do we cut our taxes? Or, if we're not prepared to do any of that, what will we do with public spending? Will we increase public spending, even though clearly we're in a situation where we can't afford the spending commitments that have already been made? Or will we make brave decisions about rewiring our money so that it serves the priority needs of the people of Scotland? And so, I have to say to you that I don't come here with a group bearing gifts to say, listen, I can solve all your problems, we can deliver all this additional funding, because that is not the reality that we're facing in Scotland. Other candidates.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

That's your time up, Stephen. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Kainde, I'm going to come to you, same question.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

Thank you. Having worked in the third sector for most of my career, I know exactly what it is like going year to year with a static budget. You are trying to make sure that your staff receive cost of living payments and you have the same budget year after year. Every year you go through that crisis of are we going to get funding? And it's simply not good enough. And it does such a disservice to the incredible work that third sector organisations like carers centres do. Scottish Labour wants to completely change our relationship with the third sector. We want to recognise the enormous work and contribution that voluntary organisations make in the social care sector, in the statutory sector, and make sure that the standard is at least three-year funding terms so that you have that predictability, you know that you're going to be able to get the support that you need. We also believe in a national care service, and not one that is about renegotiating management structures, but is genuinely about delivering a vision that delivers for social care and enables dignity for all people who are in receipt of social care, which is not something that we've seen, despite the SNP having had control of social care for more than 20 years.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. And Alyn, same question to you, please.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

You read my mind. Yes, the situation in the carer centres is a symptom of the way Scotland's governed. And I'm very drawn to what kind he says they're about a three-year settlement. When we were in the European Union, farmers had a seven-year financial settlement, so they had certainty about what they could invest, what they couldn't. The Scottish government doesn't get that from Westminster. We have to wait until the UK Chancellor announces her budget and then there's the Barnett consequentials and the Scottish Government is not allowed to borrow in the way that an independent state is and has to balance its budget every year. So the Scottish Government then has to pass that on to local authorities and local authorities have to pass that on to the third sector. And that's where the third sector is often the price taker at the end of that process. Now the Scottish Government's allocated 88.4 million pounds to organisations like the Stirling Carers Centre. Is there a better way we could do that? I think that's an open question, because what we're seeing is the way that the finances are run doesn't allow the certainty for the third sector that we need to see because I want to see support services as close to the ground as possible. And the Stirling Sarah Centre, I think, needs a longer term financial envelope and more money into the system. But the biggest problem that we have in Scotland is that there's money in the system, but it's not going to the front line to the extent that it needs to. That's what needs to change.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Alyn. Okay, Moira, have you got the microphone there? Can we hear you? I don't know, can you? Yes, we can.

**Moira Carmichael - Carer and IJB Carer Representative for Stirling**

And my question has already partly been answered. My question was, do you have lived experience of being of caring or working closely with unpaid carers? And how has that shaped your priorities for supporting carers locally?

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Who would you like that question to go to first, Moira?

**Moira Carmichael - Carer and IJB Carer Representative for Stirling**

Andrew, I'd like to hear.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Here we go. Thanks, Moira.

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

Thank you very much for that. I didn't have very much experience of being an unpaid carer until I entered a new relationship a few years ago, and my partner has a number of overlapping conditions that have really opened my eyes to all sorts of different aspects of lived experience in terms of being an unpaid carer and how very frequently our society is very keen to put people into individual boxes. You are a wheelchair user or you are someone who has a mental illness or this, that, the other. It doesn't necessarily account for the fact that all of these things can overlap and interact. The fact that you can be put on one set of drugs that are aiming to help you with one problem and that they then interfere with something else. They make it more difficult for you to be mobile. You can't exercise properly. And then the doctor tells you to go and lose weight and you go, well, that's not very helpful because these drugs you put me on made me gain weight. All of these things is a really challenging environment to live in and to work in. So that's really, I think I already understood the extent to which things are kind of Things are overlap, things overlap, things don't fit neatly into boxes, but yeah, that lived experience has really underlined to me how it's important that we get our different services to talk to each other, in short.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. Rachel, would you like to respond to that question?

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

I can respond by saying, no, I haven't got any experience in that. The only thing I would say is that I don't think you have to have experience, direct experience, to be able to format, workable structures and infrastructure to support vulnerable groups. And in politics, we can't all have experience of farmers, medicine, education, caring, but I don't think that prevents me from being able to be an effective partner within the care sector.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. And Amanda, I know you've kind of touched on that.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Hello. Hi. Yeah, I mean, I am an unpaid carer myself. I listen quite often to my daughter's comments about the impacts that being brought up with her brother who had a learning disability and autism and parents who were constantly having to fight to get a diagnosis, fight to get him into the right school placement. So it had a huge impact on her life. I think if somebody said to me as a carer, what is the one thing that you would like somebody to do? I'd like them to understand our position. So for example, recently I had to have a medical appointment, I had to have an MRI scan and I spoke to the cardiologist and they said, we'll send you an appointment. I said, well, I am actually a carer and I do have caring responsibilities. That's fine, we'll note that down. And they sent me an appointment at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. And there was no way that I could go to that appointment because that is the prime time when my son needs his medicine, he comes back from his placement, he needs his supper, he needs his bath, all of which I have to do. So I think, I don't know about you, but I think just sometimes I want people to listen and just get into our lives and get into our shoes. And if I phone up the doctor and say, I'm a carer, I need an appointment, or for a medical appointment, when can

you come? When can you make it? When can we make it available for you? And I know there's huge issues about that, but I think that that's the frustrating thing that people really don't understand what we're living to day by day.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. Thanks. OK, thanks for that question, Moira. The next question has come from various carers, and it's about young carers. Young carers face risks to their education, their mental health, and future opportunities. How will you ensure young carers are identified early, supported properly, and able to reach their full potential? Kainde, we're going to start with you.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

So, I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about young carers, and I know from my own son's experience, he was flying under the radar because he was doing fine. His brother was taking up all of our time, our energy, and our attention, and wee Zaff was just getting on fine until he wasn't getting on fine. And then things really started going wrong for him and the impact that had on his mental health was absolutely chronic and the guilt that I felt as his mother for having missed that was absolutely crushing. The support that we have had from the Carer Centre has been incredible. For the last two years, he's had someone going in to see him at school one day a week, sitting with him, drawing, playing games, talking to him about the things that he wants to talk about. And he's a wee shy boy. He doesn't really open up, he doesn't really talk about his feelings, but she's been able to really get to the core of the things that he finds difficult. And he's doing brilliantly now. He's a resilient wee thing. He has energy, he has great friends, and he's been able to move on from that support that he's had. I think that one-to-one support for children is absolutely invaluable. So I think if I would recommend anything, if I would want to do anything, it would absolutely be to make sure that all young people have a safe person that they could speak to about what's going on in their lives and what that means for them, who will understand, but is unconnected to school or to their parents, because that is so important.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Stephen, I'll come back to you, Amanda.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

I think that was a very good answer, because at the end of the day… Well, it was. I think it was a very good answer because, you know, adults have a responsibility to have an eye out for young people who are going through stressful and anxious situations. And I'm especially grateful for the quality of the teachers we have in this country, the classroom assistants, school leaders, who are very conscious of these issues, particularly in the diverse nature of the society that we now live in. I would simply say this in relation to support in general, whether it's for young carers or for unpaid carers. Support isn't always very easily accessible from my own personal experience. I'm not going to sit here and say that I've had direct experience of unpaid caring, but I know many families who are in that situation, and sometimes it isn't very easy to get the support that you need, whether they're young or whether you're older, and you're in a care responsibility. And the other thing is, sometimes it's quite difficult to see the signposts. Thirty seconds, Stephen. Where to get the help. It's sometimes quite confusing. There are so many different places you could go, and sometimes when there are so many different things that might be available to you, can't actually see any of them because it's too confusing. And we just need to simplify this aspect of the support that's available to people who care, regardless, and I've got a friend who has a husband who is suffering the consequence of a stroke. And some of her experiences are harrowing just to listen to.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you, Stephen. Thank you, Amanda.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Thank you. I'm absolutely jumping out of my seat, desperate to answer this question. A couple of things you don't know about me. I was a teacher myself for 31 years and I also, I'm on the Liberal Democrat Policy Committee and I'm really glad to see that I have been banging the drum for you, glad to tell you I've been banging the drum for young carers on our policy committee. We have already passed a motion at our conference last year and it is part of our manifesto that we want

a young carer's lead every school. And not only that, I'm pushing for it to be in universities because when my daughter was young, she didn't get a night's sleep sometimes. We couldn't help her with her homework. We couldn't go out for a pizza with her little brother. We couldn't go to the cinema. She did not have a normal upbringing at home like her siblings. She didn't want to have friends around for tea just in case Archie had a meltdown. And so she's actually, she also said to me once, do you know, Mum, I'm a glass child. What's that? It's a child that's invisible because the parents are focusing on the other child. And it broke me in two when I heard that because I tried so hard to protect her from what was going on at home. So we were a young carer's lead in all schools. It's in our manifesto. And I so often had to go in and advocate for Brooke, my daughter, and explain to teachers what her home life was like. Let's get young carers, leads, advocates into schools, people that really understand what young carers are going through so they can talk every day and they have someone to go to every day so they can share their experiences at home.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Amanda. Well done. I'm going to move on to the next question. And do we have Sylvia Heggie? Do we have Sylvia? No. So I'm going to ask Sylvia's question. And although Sylvia was going to ask it, again, this is another question that's probably come through from a lot of people and has been touched on earlier. Carers often act as the glue holding services together. What will you do to improve coordination between the NHS, social care and local counsellors councils, sorry, so carers aren't left to navigate everything alone. Alyn.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Thank you, Sylvia. Sadly, she can't be here. It's A crucial question, and I think it's going to be one of the challenges of the next Parliament, because we can say, I could say from an SNP perspective, we're putting record amounts of money into the system, which is true. No, it's your money. It's taxpayers' money. But it's not because we have greater needs at all the time. We're finding, we discovered a lot more stars when we invented telescopes. We're better at identifying needs. And some people are trying to stigmatize those needs within society, saying, no, they're not really needing support. Yes, people are needing support. The question is whether it's happening and whether it's working. And there are gaps between health and social care, particularly the joint boards and the local authorities. And that's one of the things I've found in Stirling that has been quite shocking to me, I have to say where there's a lot of people on the public purse sitting in a circle wondering why things aren't working as well as they need to. And it's organisations like the Carers Centre and like the advocates that carers are for their loved ones and themselves, who are often bridging those gaps in terms of sharing information, in terms of coordinating practices, and we need to raise our game. And that's one of the things I want to see happen locally and nationally in the next Parliament, because there's a lot of good people working in the system, but we need to do better for the people that we're serving. We just do.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Let's just come down the line, Andrew.

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

Well then. I won't claim to have any silver bullets. I'd agree with a lot of what Alyn said there. It's an immensely challenging picture trying to get different big organisations to talk to each other properly. I think one of the big things we can do is we have had a tendency over the past 15 years of government, in particular, ever since 2010, of starting to means test more and more and make people jump through more and more hoops in order to be able to get to the support that they really need. Often under the guise of efficiency, it doesn't make a system more efficient if you're just outsourcing all of that work on to unpaid carers and people within society who don't make a number in a spreadsheet. You're not numbers in the spreadsheet, you're people, but because you don't appear on the balance of the budget, that means that it's easier to say, oh, well, that'll work fine. I think we need to be honest about what we need to spend in order to be able to get our services talking to one another, but we also need to reduce those barriers. I can't claim to have all the answers, but I would agree with Alyn, it's a real challenge that we do need to be putting a lot of energy into in the coming years.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Rachel. Thank you, Andrew.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

Okay, so our position in reform is that Too many of you guys are doing the job that the system should be doing and fixing the NHS and social care doesn't have to be an abstract concept because dealing with that will directly reduce the pressure on unpaid carers. So fixing the NHS bottlenecks is critical in this and that would sort of release the burden on you as a group. Reform is committed to fixing the delayed discharge problem. So because you guys are having to pick up the slack when that happens. We want to try and break down the silos that are in the care and health sector. So we need more integrated conversations, activities. That all comes from decentralising stuff from Holyrood and putting it right back in the lap of Stirling Council and the systems that operate underneath.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

That council.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

So we want to expand community care, GP services, and we want to integrate our adult social care properly so that we're all invested in our locality and in our communities and the care that's required within that.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. Kainde, you're keen to respond to that.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

I am. And I suppose I want to believe what Alyn is saying and the lovely story that he's spinning. But I was looking at my diary and what I was doing five years ago today was writing a manifesto for people living with dementia and unpaid carers for the last Scottish Parliament elections. And what was in that was a right to care breaks. This is 2021, a right to care breaks, Anne's Law, joint record between health and social care so that you only had to tell your story once and it would be carried all the way through. Five years on, we only just got the rights, but not the money to go with it. We have been promised an app. Now the UK government have offered an app to Scotland that would help to coordinate doctor's appointments prescriptions, your test results, all of that. And the UK government have offered it to Scotland. But Scotland wants to make its own. That's going to take five years to produce. We need that now. That's the NHS office. That's exactly what I'm talking about. What we want to do is to refocus on the family doctor model. So you're not calling up at 8 o'clock hoping that you see a family doctor, but your doctor knows you and your story. You're not having to retell your story to a stranger every single time. Every time you need a medical appointment, every time you need your prescription renewed, every time you go into hospital, every time you need social care. It's one story, you tell it once, you have that familiarity and they do the coordinating. It's not up to the carer to coordinate, it should be the GP that's doing that and that is what we will make happen.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. We're going to move on, Stephen. You can come back to that question at the end if you want. So we have a question from Kirsty Hall. Kirsty, I'm going to read your question. Have a think about who you would like to respond to that first. Unpaid carers often feel forced to choose between staying in work and accessing very limited financial support. What will you do to improve carers' financial security and support those trying to remain in employment? Where are you, Kirsty? Anybody in particular? Amanda.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

I was jumping on the microphone then because obviously it's our Wendy Chamberlain, our North East Fife Liberal Democrat MP whose private member's bill was the Carers Leave Act. And it started off with she gives carers a right to a week's unpaid leave. And she did want to extend that, but it unfortunately got turned down at Westminster by the Westminster government to a week's paid leave. So obviously we led on getting more rights for carers. And looking at carers at work, you do get time off for dependents. And also the good thing here is also you get the carers positive if you businesses that will support carers and businesses. But we also led on raising the threshold that carers can earn in work before you lose your carer support payments. And we also have been trying to fight for the carers that had to pay back because of the overpayment when you were paid just

over 1 pound over the limit and then lost all your carers support payment for the week, which was scandalous. It's another post office scandal. So I mean, we are pushing for carers in work, and I know how hard it was as well. And I'm a teacher. I can't go and do one day's pay support supply because I would earn too much and lose my carer support payment. Thank you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Stephen.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Yeah, the whole issue that you highlight about cliff edge.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Do you want to take the mic, Stephen?

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

It's absolutely critical. The fact is that the way the SNP have constructed so many benefits, there is a trap that people fall into, that it's a disincentive to work, a disincentive to try to get more work or better paid work, simply because you will lose all of the benefits you've accrued. That is a cruel system and it badly needs to be reformed. Look, the Conservative manifesto at this election is get Scotland working. We absolutely believe that the route out of many of our difficulties is to expand our workforce, to be able to have a people who are skilled up, tooled up, to be able to work in a modern economy and earn the sorts of incomes that their training, their skills, their appetite for work, their ambition justifies. And frankly, at the minute, the SNP are quite content to have a system that does exactly what we are describing. And I'm just going to pick up very quickly because I've got a few seconds in hand on the point Alyn made about funding. I'm sorry, but that is a fairy tale, ladies and gentlemen, that the SNP have got these record amounts of money. That's not what the councils in Scotland have experienced for the last decade. And that's why we have such chronic resource issues at the IJB. It's entirely because of a lack of funding from the Scottish Government to local authorities. And frankly, there is no pride to be taken, Alyn, in the record of your government in relation to these matters, whether it's in relation to benefits and the way the benefits have been constructed or the way that the lack of funding presents difficulties in the IJB.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. Alyn, I feel I should give you the ability to respond to that.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Try and stop me. Yes, the point about budgets being passed on from the UK government to the Scottish government to local authorities to the third sector. That's a factor of the UK system and that's a factor of devolution. That's the reality of devolution. The Scottish government doesn't have long-term flexibility to borrow. It doesn't have long-term flexibility over its own budgets. So that's passed on to local authorities, which is passed on to the third sector. That's what I want to change with independence, because an independent Scotland won't do it like this. An independent Scotland will use all our resources to the betterment of us as a community. So that's a crucial thing that we need to do. But Kirsty's point about carers and work, again, cuts to the heart of devolution. The Scottish Government has been able to create a number of advantages through the Social Security Scotland model, which is looking after people. My point earlier about 577 pounds a head per eligible carer. That's payments that don't exist down south. I also want to see more flexible work for carers and better recognition of the caring contribution that's made by carers to the workplace. But workplace rights are reserved to Westminster. So that's something that needs to be changed there. Likewise, taxation of work and benefits is largely a Westminster matter as well. So this needs to join up better, but flexible working for everybody is good for people who might be that bit older and want to ease themselves out of the workplace. It's better for carers. It's better for people who want more flexible mental health, work-life balance. Getting better workplace rights would be better for all of us. Much of that is reserved to Westminster.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you, Alyn. Rachel, would you like to respond to that? Thank you.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

So it is entirely within the Scottish National Party's gift to remove all cliff edges when it comes to income tax bands. And the only person in this room who's going to pretend otherwise is Alyn. It's not true, and I would be challenging anybody else on the panel to let them away with that. The reality is that unpaid carers can lose thousands of pounds of benefit for just being a little bit, getting a pay rise in some instances. It's just nonsense. Income tax tapering is an absolute necessity and this facade that it's Westminster's fault is just for the birds and I just, I can't, I'm just beyond words that you think you can that we're all so stupid in the room that you think we're going to swallow that. So I'm sorry, it's just that's not on.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Right, well, let's move on. Again, a question that's come from various carers on wellbeing and short breaks. Many unpaid carers experience poor mental and physical health. How will you ensure carers can access timely wellbeing support and meaningful short breaks and how will you deliver? Again, back to the existing commitments on the Carers Act. Andrew, can you have a go at that one?

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

Shuffling through my notes very rapidly there. Pardon me. One of the things we announced our manifesto today is to try to increase the number of free walk-in mental health support hubs that we have across the country. We've already got projects like the Nook in Glasgow, Thrive in Edinburgh. We'd like to see more like that so that people can walk in, because waiting for mental health support, diagnoses can be immensely challenging. I think it's also really important that we make sure that all types of support, whether that's in education, in terms of work, access to benefits, And that's not dependent on diagnosis of conditions, which might take years to come, as I've personally experienced, as I'm sure many of you in the room have experienced as well. And I think we need to work. As a society, we keep saying time and time again, we need to give mental health the same priority we do, physical health. We've said it time and time again, and we've not cracked it yet, to say the least. So I think we do need to redouble our efforts. The Scottish Greens are going to support year-on-year real terms increases to mental health expenditure over the next Parliament. And we hope that other parties will be supporting that too.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Andrew. Amanda, would you like to respond to that? Your microphone's there.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Okay, so what the Liberal Democrats are saying is the respite must be person-centred. We all look after such a variety of our vulnerable ones, don't we? From somebody who's looking after their elderly spouse that's got dementia to somebody who's looking after a young child who's in school and struggling in school. What I want to see is more variety provision for overnight breaks. We're parent carers. We've got a 27-year-old daughter and a 23-year-old son. They should have flown the nest. We should be able to go off like our neighbours do in their camper van or go and have a city break or something like that. We have to plan so far and ahead. And sometimes what we want is just a bit of a weekend at home without our son. Bless him, we love him to bits. So we can relax and watch the telly. We can have a few drinks. And no, we don't have to get up on Sunday morning at 6 o'clock in the morning when he starts bouncing around just because mum and dad have had a couple of glasses of wine last night and watched a late night movie. And the problem is, a lot of the places, there's not a variety of overnight breaks in places. So we need to look at where somebody like my 23 year old 'Tigger' son can go and stay overnight and where somebody's more passive, perhaps vulnerable loved one can go and stay overnight. And we need to look at a variety of respite places, overnight short breaks.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

Thanks, Amanda. Stephen.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Yeah, I wanted to highlight the anxiety that many carers, I'm sure I don't have to tell any of you about this, but the Medicare's experience because of the difficulty there is in sometimes communicating

some flexibility with particularly paid care that they might be receiving. There is a difficult negotiation around the respite leave. Frankly, that in itself causes increased levels of anxiety. And it all comes down to this lack of coordination between different aspects of the public services. And it's deeply frustrating to have to speak to multiple people and try and to be the interlocutor between different government agencies, different government departments, different levels of government in order to get something that is as straightforward as a few days of rest, peace and quiet in order to recover some of that mental health related issue that is only too real and it's driven largely by anxiety and it's heightened when the things that I'm describing happen. And that's from the experiences of very close friends or family and also of my constituents over the last few years. And I'll just mention the issue of diagnosis. It is very, very difficult to get a diagnosis in relation to mental health issues, whether they're young or old. We're getting a bit better on the young side in Forth Valley, thankfully. But if you're an adult, no chance at all. And it's deeply distressing to hear some of the stories and some of the some of the things that happen to people in our community because they're not getting diagnosed to get the help that they need. And that needs to be remedied.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Yeah, thank you. Okay, have we got Robert in the audience? Robert Cairney. Hi, Robert. You've got the microphone already.

**Robert Cairney - Carer and Young Carers Service Volunteer**

Go on, yeah. Can you hear me?

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Yeah.

**Robert Cairney - Carer and Young Carers Service Volunteer**

So, My question, just before I premise that, we've been lucky enough for the last three years to go up to the Scottish Parliament for Young Carers' Day of Action and able to watch PMQs. And this is where my question comes from. What's very concerning in that conduct is that whenever, whoever it is, it might be Labour, SNP, Conservative, you know, they might put a motion on for that day. And literally after PMQs finish, I think about 60 to 70% of the chamber then walk out, leaving only 30% of the MSPs to answer questions on the carers and carers' rights of that day. So on that note, why is it that Scottish government support seems to be that it's the flavour of the month often used as political parties to score points. Can we not move towards more cross-party collaboration instead of the political points that we're scoring in regards to what happens for unpaid carers and young carers? And how do you and your party want to address this?

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Who do you want to start responding to that question, Robert?

**Robert Cairney - Carer and Young Carers Service Volunteer**

Alyn Smith.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Good. That's what I would have decided too.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Thanks very much, Robert. Yes, absolutely. And I don't know if you're aware, I cut my teeth in the European Parliament, which I don't like yah-boo-sucks politics. I think that there's common ground with everybody, even on this panel. There'll be common ground between us and some stuff. There might be disagreement about how to get there, but I want to work on how to get there. I don't like yah-boo-sucks politics. I don't do it - leaves me very, very tired and cold. And look at what we were able to do with the act that we just passed on care reform. Now that created in July just last year a legal right to respite breaks for carers. And that's either breaks for the carers or breaks for the people being cared for. Now we need to make sure that the budget's put behind that properly and that's going to be a work in progress and it's going to be challenging. But there was a lot of the parties in Holyrood United to make that happen. And that's one of the things where you've got two votes in this

election. And you can split them in different ways. Obviously, I'd like to see you both vote SNP, but you may well not want to do that. But the Scottish Government system, the Scottish Parliament system is designed to force parties to cooperate. And I think that gets better outcomes, that gets stronger outcomes. The Greens and the SNP had a coalition for a couple of years. We got some stuff done. And the other parties, I think, we all need to come to the table with something. And on carers, it's too important for yah-boo-sucks stuff, which is why I'm not doing it.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Done, Alyn. I didn't give you a countdown there. What is yah-boo-sucks politics? Okay. I'm going to come to you now.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

I'll let you come in after me. The Parliament was meant to be built on consensus. And in Parliaments one and two, that is absolutely what happens. Because the electoral system, when the Lib Dems worked with Labour to deliver free personal care, to abolish tuition fees, all the things that are on the SNP leaflet that you'll be getting through your door in the next couple of days, that we did, What we haven't seen in the last 20 years is that level of consensus and cooperation and willingness to work together. The only time we've seen that recently was on the end of life bill that was in the last week of Parliament. Now, whatever your thoughts on it, that was a meaningful debate where it wasn't whipped, people could take their own positions, and there was genuine depth of feeling, strong feeling but a genuine debate took place. But what we have seen over the last 20 years is that the SNP have had an absolute stranglehold on Parliament and the electoral system, which is not supposed to allow that to happen, has continued to allow that to happen. And, you know, Alyn was in Westminster. He was in the European Parliament before that. You know, Westminster is a braying pit. Stephen, I'm sorry, I slightly have to criticise you on this as well, because you know very well that you enjoy the cut and thrust of politics. What I want to see is people working together to deliver for carers.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Can we have Stephen respond to that, please? Of course, Amanda.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Listen, there's a lot of passion in politics. You love it.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

You love it.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

There's a lot of passion in politics because we believe what we're saying. And I respect all of you because of the fact that you do believe what you're saying.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Will you respond to the question?

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

And we disagree. But the point is, I want to agree, actually, I agree with Alyn Smith. Because actually, when you get past the performative, the theatrical of FMQs, and you talk about substantive issues, usually not in the chamber, you discover that actually we have a lot of common areas of agreement. And in relation to one, two, you said first session, second session. Let me say the third session when Alec Salmond was the first minister. No, I think to be fair to Alec, there was some interesting, there must be, there was interesting working across the chamber then. The Conservatives and Labour worked with the SNP then. Something happened after that. I think Nicola Sturgeon might be at the heart of all of that. Can you talk to the audience, please? My point is, it is possible for politicians to work together. I want to reassure you of that. We do have a lot of common ground. And for sustainable change to be achieved, there needs to be that cross-party working. And the SNP need to learn how to bring government bills to Parliament that will get that best effect, because currently they don't do it that way. It's highly confrontational, it's highly tribal. And yes, it sometimes brings out not necessarily the best in us.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks. Quickly then.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Quickly, I would just like to say I think the Liberal Democrats have been the grown-ups in the room. And both, well, don't interrupt, I'm talking, teacher here. We did negotiate, we did get some asks out of the Scottish Government, out of the SNP in the budget recently for 7 million pounds to speed up as I mentioned earlier on, autism and ADHD assessments. And that does have an impact on families that are carers because we need to get children into the right educational placements as quickly as possible because it has an impact on the whole family. We also got a right for family carers to have the right to earn more, so that was us in the budget. And also course for college, we secured a future course for college. So the Liberal Democrats will sit in the room and we will We will discuss and we will stand up for carers when it is the right thing to do. Bill by bill, case by case. We will negotiate and we will be the grown-ups in the room.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Good for you, Amanda. Right, Irene, where's Irene? Irene Raine? I know, I'm sorry, Denise, I'm hopping about just so that folk don't have to listen to my voice. Irene, are you okay? Trying to remember. Oh, here we are. Have you got it?

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

My husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's 4 years ago. He was diagnosed by a consultant psychiatrist who then put him on medication. So since then, we have had no review of the medication and he has not seen any professional medic who can help. In that time, Gordon has deteriorated quite a lot with lots of other symptoms that he didn't have originally. So it would be very useful to have the psychiatrist a look at him. So what would you do for me to be able to see a psychiatrist with my husband?

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Okay. I'm just going to come to this side of the table. So Andrew, do you want to take a response to that?

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

I think it can be incredibly challenging to find the right person to talk to. And one of the traps that we find ourselves in at the moment is that the NHS is overstretched and under pressure to meet targets and to say no to people at times, to say, oh no, well, we've already seen you, so we're not going to talk to you again. Depressingly, I have seen that one of the best ways to try and unlock these things is to go and talk to your local MSP and see if they can try and unlock that. Because funnily enough, when an MSP comes knocking to various organisations, suddenly things become unlocked that previously were locked. And that comes down a lot to just the nature of the system we live in. People are doing their best and I don't want to put the blame on anyone who works within the NHS here because they're all trying to do their best. They're all under a huge amount of pressure in different ways to meet different targets and they're just incredibly under-resourced. And some of those things are only unlocked when suddenly there is a panicked call from a chief executive or a senior manager saying, I've got the health minister breathing down my neck. Can you do something about this? That's not how the system should work. I mean, that is what I would recommend that you do until we get the system better. But yeah, we should, it should, when things change, you should be able to get re-referred for things. It is, to use that common phrase, it's just common sense. Thanks, Andrew. Can I just add one more thing? He has trouble. If I could talk to that very, very quickly. Just to say, as it comes back to what I was saying earlier about systems not being joined up, the idea that someone can have Alzheimer's and also be deaf, baffling. And yet at the same time, someone can have a condition and then can be told, oh no, but you have to have a phone appointment but you're deaf and you can't hear over the phone and yet here we are. The systems are baffling and the systems are trapping people and they need to change.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Rachel, yeah, please go.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

I think it's worth noting just generally, just because we need to obviously tease out a lot of solutions to a lot of the problems that exist, but I think it's a real paradox that with devolution seems to have for some perverse reason it seems to have caused more centralisation. Back in the day we used to have community health cares, community family doctors. We had our family, our communities looked after each other. The Dr knew us all. He knew to ask after Mrs, after Gordon if he bumped into you in the chemistry or in the supermarket, what have you. So we're all about, we're going to try and really push this sort of family, community, country in that order. We all have little units, if our families look after each other, then that's great, then that goes out to the community. But I definitely, know that at the heart of the reform, health care policy will be pushing services down to community level. We need to get back to the old way, community nursing, community doctors. Sorry, that's just not me, but yeah, so just Your husband, in the old-fashioned system, I think would have got the care that he needed and the referral that he needed. I think that, bizarrely, with devolution, we've got more centralisation and that's been lost. I think we need to get that connection back. That's my point.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Rachel.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

Thank you. Thank you for sharing your experience, Irene. And it is so common. One of the things that we are entitled to in Scotland following a dementia diagnosis is a year of support. And I spoke to a lady on the doorstep just last week in Plean and her mother had been diagnosed with dementia and she had been told that there was an 18 month waiting list for the year of support. Now, dementia is a progressive disease and the impact of 18 months is like night and day. And it is this complete lack of joining up. That's why Scottish Labour want to go back to that family doctor model. And it's interesting to hear reform talking about this when they want to abolish the NHS, they want to make it privatised. What we want to return to is a family, a model of primary care where your GP, your family doctor is the interlocutor and is advocating on your behalf. And I think we want to see similarly in social care as well because when I was working in dementia, the number of people I spoke to who said, well, my partner's condition has changed but we're not able to get another social care assessment because the social worker that we were assigned to went on maternity leave three months ago or has been reassigned somewhere else or, you know, we don't have contact with them. So you're having to tell the same story over and over again. What we need is better coordination, better integration, genuine integration of health and social care, so that support is available and you get the support that you need.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Kainde. I'm going to, and I can see your hand up, Alyn, but I want to get through the questions that we've got and open it to the floor.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

Sorry. Can I just make a correction for a statement that was made? There is absolutely no question. I need you to know, because that's a complete untruth that you've just said there, The NHS will be absolutely free to everyone at the point of delivery and will continue to do so.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

Through an insurance-based model. So you have to be...

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Right. OK, that's enough. We're going to go back to the questions. You've said what you... Yeah, you've clarified that. Thank you. I'm going to now come to a question on old age carers. Carer support payment stops at pension age, even when caring responsibilities continue. What changes would you make to ensure older carers are financially supported? I'll come to you, Stephen, and then I'll come to you, Alyn.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Yeah, it's in our manifesto that we absolutely believe that older carers should be supported. So that's the very simple answer to that question. And the broader issue that we keep coming back to is the issue of the fact that we live in a country which Alyn is quite right in saying is very wealthy. Let's just talk about how wealthy Scotland is. Let's talk about how wealthy the Scottish government's coffers are when it comes to spending. We shouldn't live in a country where health care is being rationed, as we've been discussing. We should be living in a country. Let's talk about that.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

What changes would you make?

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

We have, we have, we have record levels of taxation in this country. The, we have 2 1/2 thousand pounds more per man, woman and child to spend on public services in Scotland and in any other part of the United Kingdom. So when we're talking about these scarcities, whether it's in health or whether it's in other aspects of vital areas of support, they shouldn't exist. The question is, what are the priorities of the government? What is driving their priorities? And I think, I'm just going to say this very simply and very boldly, the SNP government for the last 10 years have had the wrong priorities because people should be the priority.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Alyn, what changes would you make to ensure that older carers are financially supported was the question.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Yes, well, counter-intuitive as it might be after that, I'll actually agree with Stephen. I do not think the carer support payment should stop at pension age. I think there should be an assessment of the household income so that if people are on a healthy payment, pension payment coming in, that should be looked at in the round, that caring responsibilities don't stop whatever your age is. And that should be recognised by the taxpayer to support people in those lives because being a carer is tough enough with the emotional situation, the practical logistics of making life work. There should be a financial assistance to that. So there's a point of agreement. But the idea that the Scottish Government has somehow spent money badly, we've been able to keep a lot of frontline services better than they are down south. We've been able to put money towards things like making sure that old folk can travel for free, young folk can travel for free, the baby box, making sure that we've got investment going into the NHS that is cutting waiting times time by time by time. Now the NHS is evolving, social care is evolving. That's why we're having 30 GP walk-in centres to make sure that the 8am rush is alleviated because sometimes getting into the GP system is a challenge. Eileen, back to your point there about if your husband hasn't had a check-in in four years, that's just not good enough. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise. That's something that does need to be changed, but getting other pinch points in the system worked through is the way to do that so that we can focus resources where they're needed. And I'm really proud of the SNP's record doing that, and I don't believe cutting taxes in order to cut services is the way to go.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Andrew.

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

It sounds like we've got cross-party consensus to extend support for carers who claim the state pension, so we'll get that done. I would say, if the Conservatives are saying it, SNP are saying it, it's in the Greens manifesto. I think we've got the votes for it, so let's get it done. I think it's strange to hear rhetoric of the coffers are full and yet public finance is stretched. A lot of that does tie back to the context that we find ourselves in. I mean, I'm not one for political point scoring. I will point out that after 15 years of Conservative austerity, we've now had another two years of Labour austerity. And that funding is not, so the Scottish Government is limited by those consequentials and in terms of the funding that we can actually get to do those things. It's not straightforward by any stretch. And I'm aware I'm probably wandering away from the question. So I don't want to. But yes, I think we

absolutely need to be making sure that we're not, again, it's pension age becoming another one of these cliff edges where your support just drops off. We need to just be cleverer about the way that we design these things. And We're making progress. Unfortunately, the progress is not as fast as we need it in order to benefit from it. We need to move fast. We need to work together. Scottish Greens have worked in collaboration with other parties. We will continue to do so throughout the next Parliament to get these things done. Thank you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Let me see. Yes, okay, go for it. I'll give you 30 seconds, Amanda.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Okay, I've got 30 seconds. Okay, you asked what I would do about the fact that we are going to lose, I will lose my carer support payment at 67. My husband and I vowed to keep our son living with us at home as long as we can and I'm hoping that will be beyond 67. We will save the Scottish Government, the Scottish taxpayer by keeping him at home. So I'm telling you what I'm going to do. I am on the Scottish Liberal Democrat Policy Committee and I'm going to go back to the Policy Committee and I'm going to make it the next motion at our next conference and I'm going to get it in our next manifesto. So that's what I'm going to do about it. Hopefully I'll get it done by the next seven years.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

I'm 67. Carley, it's time for, do you want me to read your question or do you want to go for it? Go for it.

**Carley O'Hare - Operations Manager, Stirling Carers Centre**

It's kind of been touched on already by some of the panel, but It is something that our carer support officers are asked about on a daily basis when we speak to unpaid carers. So my question is, the Care Reform Bill passed in June 2025 made the right to a break from caring law for unpaid carers. With implementation still being developed nationally, what will you do to ensure that it is delivered effectively in this local authority?

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Who do you want to go first, Carley? Kainde.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

I mean, we would have done it five years ago. It makes absolute sense. What we've seen under the SNP actually has been austerity in local government for the last 20 years. Over the last 10 years, they've cut 7.8 billion pounds from local government budget. That's 101 million from this local authority alone. Our health and social care partnership was in absolute crisis this time last year in a situation where they were unable to sign off new budgets unless the chief executives of NHS Forth Valley, Stirling Council and Clackmannanshire Council were sat in a room signing off care packages. That is the extent of the financial crisis in social care in this country. And we don't have a national care service five years after it was promised. We walked all the way up the garden path with that and we still don't have it. What we want to do is introduce a national care service that is worth the name, that will make sure that standards of care are universal across the whole of Scotland. But we also want to make sure that decisions are being made by local authorities and that local authorities are properly funded. Beyond that, it's not just local authorities, but that we recognise the absolute vital role that third sector plays in delivery of social care and providing support to people who make use of social care. And with that, we would absolutely be able to make a huge difference. So we are absolutely on board with implementing the right to care breaks and making sure that is part of a national care service that is worth its name.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks again. I'll come to you, Alyn, to respond to that, please.

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Very happily. I mean, getting the bill through was a job in itself, but giving people a legal right is only part of the process if it's not properly funded. So we've got to make sure that the funding is tracking

through with that right. Now that's not to say that the public purse is going to pay for everything. If people can make a contribution, I think it's reasonable to help. That would be part of the discussion as well. But absolutely what we're doing with health and social care needs to be significantly changed. Because what we are doing right now, organisations are not sharing information properly. People are falling through the cracks. And as I said earlier, often it's the carers who are having to bridge those gaps between the organisations that aren't talking to each other properly. So there is a challenge that needs to be met. The Scottish Government's already put 8 million pound into the respite fund, but 8 million pound nationwide isn't going to be enough. So we're not going to need to fund that better. We're going to need to make sure that's funded properly. And to govern is to choose. And the people who make these decisions on your behalf are answerable to you through events like this. And that's why it's so important to be represented by people that you trust and that people that share your values. And I believe it's more important, as we've seen locally in this local authority, where the SNP administration raised the council tax a bit to make sure that services were protected, there was no cuts to Stirling services when they were on the table. And there were people in Stirling Council pushing for a council tax cut in order to cut those services. So we've got to make sure that this is looked after properly in the round, and I'm very proud to be part of the SNP, which is doing that job day in, day out.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Alyn. Rachel, would you like to respond to that question?

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

Yeah, sure. Thank you. So I think that it's refreshing to hear Alyn acknowledge that there's a shortfall in care provision. I'm just staggered as to why that's the case when the SNP have been in power for 19 years. So that responsibility does land firmly at the SNP's door. There is enough money, guys. There is enough money to do all of this. The problem is, that it's to do with government centralization. If we could remove the spending obligations that are dictated at local level, they're imposed upon us by Holyrood, we're actually pushing the money down to our local authorities. And that's where you guys come in. It's where Stirling Cares come in. It's where we decide as a community, as a council area, where the money is spent. And you're going to have to sharpen your elbows and fight for your pot, but that's what this is all about. We're discussing how we prioritise our spend. And this is fantastic that we're doing stuff at this, and you feel part of the discussion and part of the decision-making process. So I say no, to all of that. There's billions of pounds sloshing around. You guys have been great and you've saved us 15 billion. Thank you very much indeed. But you need to see a bit more infrastructure that we can help deliver for you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Rachel. We've got, I just want to, we've got 6 minutes left and I just want to, believe it or not, I just want to ask, before I give anybody else the opportunity to speak. If there's any other questions from the audience, anybody would like to ask anything? Okay, we have two. So this lady here just directly in front of me.

**Nikki Leavitt - Carer**

Oh, hi, my name is Nikki. My husband has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's for about 3 years now. And we're very fortunate that we have things like Stirling Carers, Alzheimer's Scotland, to support us, but it is, the caring system was broken after Brexit, and now we're forced, and I know you get subsidized after a while, but on my chum, she's paying 130 grand a year for her mom to go into a home. She's lucky she gets to choose that home, but also unfortunate that she has to pay so much. And I'm just wondering if all this talk about money, and money is great, but maybe we should be looking at starting from the base. It's here, you guys did the daily mile, I think it was, that they implemented at schools, and that made sure they were out, they got fresh air, they exercised. Maybe this is something we should be bringing down to a level where we're all, you get taught in school.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

So what is your question? What is your question? Can you use the microphone? We can't quite hear you. Sorry. Oh, Paul, we got a problem with this mic. Thank you.

**Nikki Leavitt - Carer**

That's OK. Sorry.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

That's it.

**Nikki Leavitt - Carer**

Maybe we should be starting kids to learn about caring for each other at and I know you had the idea of having a leader in school. I think that it's we need more than that so people people's parents will get cancer and it's just to normalize everything. Alzheimer's or a parent with cancer or a child with autism. It's about normalizing all of that so that they learn at an early age to look after one another and their families. My grandma was from the Philippines. They looked after their family unit and it spread within their whole island. And it's just about an early education and normalizing this kind of stuff. So it's cool.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

I'm going to ask Stephen to respond to that.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

I've never sat aside more energetic panellists.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Maybe it'll rub off, Stephen. Maybe it'll rub off.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Yeah, maybe. Oh, look, I'm not, we don't have time to discuss your opening comment, which I completely disagree with. I think the system's been broken a lot longer than the time period you suggest, but for different reasons than you may think. But I agree with you 100%. I mean, one of the things that the Conservatives have been saying for a long time now is you need to teach the skills of resilience and self-reliance in the school system. You need to be able to equip our young people with the skills that enable them to make their way through life, with that degree of independence. That's the only independence that I would ever agree with, by the way, Alyn Smith. And part of that is an active lifestyle. And it's about sport. My colleague Brian Whittle were here, the former Olympian who is a conservative MSP in the last parliament, he would be enthusing, like you, about these issues. We need, indeed, we need to be able to equip our young people to be able to deal with the pressures, the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of life. And frankly, at the moment, we're letting them down because we're not doing enough of an investment in them in that setting, but also in the other settings including those that occur outside of school. So I completely agree with that. And can I just make the point, just to conclude, this might be my final comment, no one in Stirling Council was suggesting a council tax cut. That's complete misinformation and frankly not worthy of Alyn Smith because I think he knows that that's not the case. And when he says a wee bit more of an increase, best part of 9% of a council tax increase is not a wee bit.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Andrew, would you like to respond to the lady's question, the lady's point?

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

I'll dive in quickly. Yes, thank you. I think what I've been hearing a lot of tonight, I'm kind of spinning this into a closing statement all in one, because I think a lot of what we're hearing about there is, and what a lot of the panel have been talking about really, is strengthening our communities, Going back to the grassroots, going back to the basics, getting people to talk to one another again, getting people to care for each other. This is one of the wonderful things that's brought you all into this room tonight, is that you're being supported by a local group. I don't doubt that many of you support each other on a day-to-day basis, and that's brilliant. We absolutely need to make that easier in our country, and we need to be able to One of government's key roles is to facilitate that, to enable us to have strong, resilient communities. And yes, to be able to bring together that intergenerational work,

starting from kids, but also allow kids to interact with people who are in care, who are supporting, who need help, and give them that life experience. Because for some people, For some lucky people, they don't run into life's difficulties for a long time. Some people never run into those difficulties and then think that because they've not run into any difficulties, that those who have haven't worked hard enough or haven't done enough, aren't deserving enough. And that's just not fair. We need to be more compassionate and caring as a society and in our local communities. Thank you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you. Right. We are at 7 o'clock. However, if I can borrow 3 more minutes of your time, I'm going to suggest that we have 30 seconds of closing comments from you all. And I'm going to start over this side this time with Alyn. 30 seconds to say to a room full of unpaid carers, why should they put you, why should they vote for you on the 7th of May?

**Alyn Smith - SNP**

Thanks, Gina. Well, we've had a good round of the houses this evening, and as I said at the outset, I'm proud to be your SNP candidate for Stirling. I live here, I want to see the police do well, and I want to see Scotland's budgets and Scotland's resources go to the betterment of Scotland's people. And the SNP government, we can be judged by our actions. Have we got everything right? No, nobody ever does. But we've had COVID, we've had an unprecedented austerity for 20 odd years continued by the Conservatives and Labour. The Scottish Government has to manage a year-on-year budget, which passes on to other organisations. That's what I want to change with independence, putting us back into the European Union, kick-starting the economy, getting the money into public services that we all need to support. But I will work with and for Stirling's carers going forward because you guys are heroes and you guys keep an awful lot of things running together and you need that recognition. So thank you for. Tonight, and thank you for being here.

**Andrew Adam - Scottish Greens**

30 seconds, I'll try and keep it shorter. Thank you all for coming tonight, thank you for holding us to account. I spoke earlier about putting people in boxes. You're all here as unpaid carers. I think you probably all care about other things as well. So I would urge you just to think carefully about who you're voting for on the ballot. Look at the panel in front of you. Think about their national leadership as well. What people do you want representing you in this country? I would be delighted if you would consider the Greens as your list vote. And thank you for your time tonight.

**Rachel Wright - Reform UK**

Okay, so thanks very much indeed for allowing us to be here. If you remember one thing from tonight, please let it be this. Reform UK will make sure that caring never leaves you worse off financially, never leaves you unsupported and never leaves you feeling invisible again. You guys give everything, time, energy and love and you ask for very little in return and we get an awful lot from you. So thank you sincerely for that. And one thing that we want to do is we want to fix the system. There's money there, there's care there, there's people there, but the system's kind of bust and we need to fix that. And I think that needs root and branch reform from the bottom up. And I'd be absolutely delighted if you entrusted us to help achieve that.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thanks, Rachel.

**Kainde Manji - Scottish Labour**

I'm going to be slightly controversial in that I don't think we need to teach people how to care. I think we need to teach society how to value care work that is undertaken. And the fact is we're all doing that care for free. Nobody is paying us to do that. We're doing it because we love the people that we care for. And people who work in care aren't doing it for the money. They're doing it for the joy that it brings, the benefit that they are giving. So it is skilled work that you're all doing, whether it's dinner ladies, whether it's cleaners, whether it is carers. I think what we need to do is to value local government because local government is where all those decisions get made. We need to properly fund it. We need to properly fund the third sector and give the third sector predictability because they are delivering so much social care just now. And we really need to value unpaid carers. And what we

need more than anything else is a national care service that is genuinely worthy of the name.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Nobody's sticking to 30 seconds, but go for it, Amanda.

**Amanda Clark - Scottish Liberal Democrats**

Scottish Liberal Democrats are the party of care. We introduced free personal care for older people, created a new pipeline of care workers through Scotland's colleges, forced the ill-fated centralisation of social care out of the budget after the SNP threw away 30 million pounds. And that could have 30 million pounds. We won the right for family carers to earn more without support having been withdrawn and passed the Carers Leave Act, giving rights to 2.4 million carers across the UK. We will empower care users and support care workers and the hundreds and thousands of unpaid carers looking after loved ones. We will invest to save, recognising that providing care reduces demand on more expensive NHS services. And we want change with fairness at its heart. Scotland deserves better. And you can vote for us on the peach ballot vote.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

Thank you, Amanda. Top that, Stephen.

**Stephen Kerr - Conservative and Unionist Party**

Peach ballot. I'm saying that in my sleep at the minute, by the way, peach ballot. Listen, I would like you to vote for me. I had the enormous privilege of being the representative of Stirling in a parliament. And it is a glorious privilege because I love this place. We've been here for 40 years, my wife and I'm more than 40 years. Our children were raised here, they went to school here. I care about this place and I care about the people. It'd been an enormous privilege to be your member of the Scottish Parliament. And what will I do with that privilege? I would simply fight every day for the best interests of the people of this area. And if that means standing up to whoever, I think you probably might have gathered I will stand up to whoever on behalf of all of you in order to make sure that we have a fairer and more equally based society. Not in terms of outcomes, but in terms of opportunity. I am passionate about that, as I am about the people of Stirling. So thank you for coming tonight. And you've been an enormously good audience. And it's been a really well-chaired meeting as well, if I might just give a vote of thanks for the... Thank you.

**Gina Alexander - Chair**

And relax for tonight. Oh man, so thank you for letting me pinch a bit of your time. Thank you to all our candidates for turning out tonight and being so passionate and enthusiastic about their own point of view and hopefully it's taking you a bit forward in your thoughts about where you'll put your vote on the ballot paper on the 7th of May. I just want to thank again the candidates, Carley, the staff of Stirling Carers Centre, who do a magnificent job every single day. And I want to thank all of you for coming out tonight where I'm sure you've got other things to do and you've come here, goodness knows what things you've had to arrange. So thank you all so much for coming along tonight.