



British Geriatrics Society
Improving healthcare
for older people

Our manifesto for the 2021 Scottish Parliament election

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The British Geriatrics Society (BGS) is the membership association for professionals specialising in the healthcare of older people across the UK. Founded in 1947, we now have over 4,000 members, including nearly 400 in Scotland. We are the only society in the UK offering specialist expertise in the wide range of healthcare needs of older people.

Older people are the main users of health and social care services and their high mortality rates, different patterns of disease presentation, slower response to treatment and requirements for social support call for specialist medical skills. Geriatricians, nurses, GPs, old age psychiatrists, allied healthcare professionals and researchers provide high quality care for older people as part of a multidisciplinary team during acute illness, chronic illness, rehabilitation and at the end of life, both in hospital and community settings.

Context

This election comes at an extraordinary time for the health service and for Scotland. The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for the entire nation and even more so for older people. 90% of deaths involving COVID-19 have occurred in people over the age of 65 and the virus has been particularly devastating in care homes. On a more positive note, vaccines for COVID-19 have been developed very quickly and are being rolled out across the country, bringing hope that the worst of the pandemic may be over.

The impact of the pandemic will however be longer lasting, with large numbers of people suffering the long-term effects of COVID and probably even larger numbers of older people who will have deconditioned as a result of lockdown or will be presenting with illnesses in later stages than otherwise would be expected. The pressure on the health and social care system is likely to be significant over the coming months and years.

The incoming Scottish Government has an opportunity to build back better and to ensure that the legacy of the pandemic in Scotland is an improved health and social care service and a Scotland that is the best place in the world in which to grow old. Political parties wishing to achieve this should prioritise the following areas.

1. Adult social care review

The pandemic has laid bare the issues facing adult social care in Scotland. It has brought to the fore the need to address failings in social care and to implement a more equitable system for all those in need of social care support,¹

including older people. The current Government commissioned an independent review into adult social care, giving the review panel the brief of developing how a National Care Service, intended to operate alongside and on equal terms with the National Health Service, could be implemented and funded.

This review has now been published. It focuses on considering social care as an investment rather than a burden and enabling the human rights of those who need social care, rather than simply managing their needs.

The incoming Scottish Government must set out their plans for implementing the recommendations of the review immediately upon taking office. It will be particularly important for the Government to set out how they intend to fund the implementation of a National Care Service and what timelines they will be working to when they enact the recommendations of the review.

2. Well-resourced multidisciplinary teams to carry out Comprehensive Geriatric Assessment

Comprehensive Geriatric Assessment (CGA) is the gold standard of ensuring that older people have their needs fully assessed and have their care planned around their needs. In order to deliver CGA, both in community and acute hospital settings, well-resourced and expanded multi-disciplinary teams are required. These teams are made up of many individuals who specialise in the assessment, care and management of older people with frailty – advanced practitioners, allied health professionals, geriatric medicine doctors (trainees and consultants) and pharmacists. We urgently need more individuals to be trained and employed in these roles to ensure the high standards of care that our population rightly expects and deserves. We urge the incoming Scottish Government to take steps to ensure the sustainability of the health and social care workforce, ensuring that we have the right skills available to meet the needs of our older people.

3. Reducing inequality

The COVID-19 pandemic has sadly amplified issues of inequality across society around housing, healthcare and access to services. Older people in particular have found themselves marginalised during the pandemic with many finding themselves isolated and unable to access services that they require to live independently. The incoming Scottish Government must take immediate steps to address this, ensuring that everyone in Scotland has the same opportunities to live healthy and independent lives throughout the life course.

4. Prioritising independence and active ageing

Prevention is and should be the cornerstone of care for older people. So much of what geriatricians, nurses, GPs and allied health professionals working with older people do is aimed at achieving better health outcomes for their

patients, allowing them to stay well, remain independent, stay at home or closer to home, and return home as quickly as possible when they are ready to be discharged from hospital care.

We call on the incoming Scottish Government to prioritise prevention of ill health and to ensure that this focus includes later life and older people. Prevention is relevant at all ages and must have a wider focus than standard messages of lifestyle change and ensuring that people are able to continue to contribute financially to society. When considering the prevention of ill health, the Government must also consider how older people – including those who may already have long term health problems – can be supported to live as well as possible and to stay healthier for longer.

5. Recognise the need for rehabilitation

As we move out of the pandemic, it will be important for the incoming Scottish Government to recognise the impact of COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns on the health of the population, particularly older people. Many older people will have reduced their levels of physical activity during lockdown, with some who had been relatively active previously barely leaving their homes for weeks or even months on end. This will have resulted in people deconditioning and developing frailty.

We recognise that there will be pressure on all parts of the health system over the coming months as there is a need to catch up on missed operations, scans and other appointments. However, it is essential for the incoming Scottish Government to invest in rehabilitation services now to ensure that we do not experience even greater demand on the system in years to come. Older people with deconditioning and frailty can be supported to improve their health but services need to be put in place to address this, to avoid subsequent crises when people present to accident and emergency departments, and require more expensive, long-term treatment.

6. Workforce recovery post-COVID

The NHS and social care workforce was stretched before COVID-19, and the pandemic has put it under extreme pressure. We know from our recent report *Through the Visor* that healthcare professionals who have cared for older people throughout the pandemic are physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted. The psychological impact of dealing with excessive death, as many of those who work with older people have done, has been significant. Members told us about the fears their families had for their safety and the impact of the pandemic on their mental health. Many members also told us about the impact the pandemic had on their work lives, including cancelled annual and study leave, increasing hours and more on-call and out-of-hours responsibilities. Most people were happy to make these changes, recognising that the circumstances were exceptional, but these ways of working are not sustainable.

Over the coming months, NHS and social care staff will be under pressure to catch up on waiting lists that have built up during the pandemic and to ensure that patients who have struggled to access services over the last year are now able to get the support they need. It will be important to balance this with the need of the workforce to recover. Work plans must be returned and leave entitlements restored. We urge the incoming Scottish Government to balance the need for NHS services to catch up with the need to support the wellbeing of the workforce and value the extraordinary contribution healthcare practitioners have made over the last year.

