



# Socialist Health Association Scotland

## Health and Care Workers Covenant

### Introduction

Health and care staff, along with other key workers, have been the pandemic's true heroes. They have worked incredibly hard at no small risk to themselves to prevent the spread of the virus and treat those affected. They have done so in challenging circumstances through faltering actions by governments and often without proper protective equipment and other safety measures. The impact on the physical and mental health<sup>1</sup> of these workers has and continues to be immense. The NHS and social care in Scotland have long relied on the workforce's goodwill, which has been very evident during the pandemic<sup>2</sup>.

In these circumstances, SHA Scotland believes that Scotland should recognise this commitment through a new Health and Care Workers Covenant. This would recognise the emotional pull of these roles, which is not always recognised in other ways. In this paper, we outline the case for such a covenant.

### Context

Many of the NHS's problems and especially social care were evident before the pandemic struck. COVID-19 has highlighted the underfunding and structural failures in the system and created some new ones. We need to recognise the value of these services and the staff who deliver them if we are to build a strong and fair recovery.

A Labour government introduced the Armed Forces Covenant in 2000. The aim is described as<sup>3</sup>:

*"To those who proudly protect our nation, who do so with honour, courage, and commitment, the Armed Forces Covenant is the nation's commitment to you. It is a pledge that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or who have served in the armed forces, and their families, should be treated with fairness and respect in the communities, economy and society they serve with their lives."*

The measures in the covenant are specific to the armed forces. They include support with education, housing, healthcare, finance and discounted services. It seeks to bring together the actions of governments, councils, businesses, charities and the wider community to support members of the armed forces, veterans and family members.

While the armed forces covenant is the best-known example of this approach, there are other examples such as for care leavers<sup>4</sup>. The United Nations also uses this language in its human rights approach including the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights<sup>5</sup> which covers a range of rights including favourable conditions of work and the right to form and join trade unions.

Members of the public have shown their appreciation of health and care workers through the weekly clapping, and businesses have provided services and discounts to staff. The public sector pay policy has been more controversial but does at least recognise this workforce's extraordinary efforts.

## What might a Health and Care Workers Covenant look like?

The Armed Force Covenant has broad support, but it may not always have delivered for members of the armed forces when considering critical issues like housing and pay. A Health and Care Workers Covenant is not a substitute for collective bargaining and strong trade union organisation. This remains the best way to protect and improve the pay and conditions of these workers. The implementation of the Fair Work Convention recommendations, as supported by the Review of Adult Social Care<sup>6</sup>, would be an important starting point. We need to pay workers with something more than just gratitude<sup>7</sup>.

Unlike the armed forces, this definition of this workforce is more fluid and would need to cover workers employed in the public, charitable, social enterprise and for-profit sectors. In Scotland, most of these workers have to be registered with the SSSC and other regulators, totalling more than 200,000 workers. That leaves unpaid carers, many of whom do not qualify for state benefits and are therefore less easy to identify. Another important difference is that over 80% of health and care workers are women, who are typically in lower paid, insecure jobs, often with caring responsibilities of their own.

The main elements of this covenant might be commitments to:

- Proper funding of the services and safe staffing levels.
- Reforming the delivery of services, including a National Care Service for all social care workers.
- Good work standards, pay and conditions. This should include sick pay and ending insecure work and zero-hours contracts.
- Education, training and personal development, including financial support.
- The highest standards of Personal Protective Equipment and health and safety provision.
- Welfare provision, including occupational health.
- Engaging the broader community. Businesses and community organisations should be able to sign up to the covenant. They can then offer practical support in ways appropriate to that organisation.

## Conclusion

There is a broad understanding of the critical role health and care workers play in delivering the services we all rely on and how raising employment standards are vital to improving services. We believe a covenant adds value to the policy initiatives and builds on the additional goodwill generated during the pandemic. This paper simply outlines and promotes the concept. It should be taken forward as a partnership involving government, local authorities, trade unions, care providers, carer representatives and others.

### Contact:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://theconversation.com/almost-half-of-nhs-critical-care-staff-show-symptoms-of-ptsd-depression-or-anxiety-153312>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55882300>

<sup>3</sup> For more detail see the official website <https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk>

<sup>4</sup> Created by an alliance of care organisations <https://www.scottishcareleaverscovenant.org>. There is a government version in England <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-of-health-and-social-care-care-leaver-covenant-offer>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/groups/independent-review-of-adult-social-care/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/27/key-workers-gratitude-covid-pandemic-emotional-labour-jobs>