

Key Messages



Continuing the Conversation on the Population Health Framework

VHS Member Engagement Event

20 March 2025

Introduction

VHS hosted a meeting on 20 March with Public Health Scotland to discuss the next steps in the new Population Health Framework, with the aim of ensuring that VHS members understand the latest developments in the thinking around the Framework and can respond to and reflect on the vital contribution that the third sector makes towards improved population health. A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the critical role that the third sector plays in shaping Scotland's public health priorities. Participants examined issues including a lack of sustainable funding, addressing specific and emerging health inequalities related to their work in communities, and improving data-sharing practices to inform policy decisions. The conversation reinforced the necessity of a strategic, evidence-based approach to reforming Scotland's health and social care landscape.

In the third event of a series organised by Voluntary Health Scotland which focus on the Framework and the third sector's role in relation to this, Mark McAllister, Organisational Lead for Strategic Development at Public Health Scotland opened the meeting and shared his presentation, giving updates on the progress of the Population Health Framework which is due to be published in April of this year. [Read Mark's PowerPoint presentation here.](#)

Integrating Health and Social Care in Scotland

Mark discussed the need for a more integrated and accessible health and social care system in Scotland. He highlighted the importance of prevention and addressing inequalities to improve life expectancy and reduce the strain on the healthcare system. Mark highlighted the unsustainable growth in healthcare spending and the need for creative and ambitious solutions to reform the social care system. He identified four key elements for this reform:

1. Improving Access to Treatment
2. Shifting the Balance of Care
3. Digital and Technology Innovation
4. Prevention

Mark also highlighted a critical challenge: the unsustainable trajectory of public sector spending, particularly within healthcare. As people live longer and with more complex conditions, demand on services continues to rise. The current fiscal position makes it clear that continuing down this path without significant reform is not viable. Instead, there is a need to be forward-thinking and ambitious in reimagining the future of Scotland's health and social care system. A greater emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and community-based care will be essential to ensuring that resources are used effectively and equitably.

What is needed is strong leadership and a collective commitment to breaking the cycle of reactive healthcare spending. By embedding prevention at the heart of Scotland's approach to public health, improving collaboration between sectors, and ensuring sustainable funding models, the country can move towards a system that not only treats illness but actively works to prevent it. Following Mark's presentation, there was an opportunity for participants to comment or to raise questions both in breakout sessions and in the plenary. The following is just a flavour of what was a very lively session.

Strengthening Collaboration Across Sectors

Collaboration emerged as a central theme of the discussion, highlighting the importance of strong, transparent partnerships between Public Health Scotland, the third sector, and government agencies. Public Health Scotland must take on a more visible role in advocating for health priorities and ensuring that commitments are translated into action. We are seeing this happening already, in relation to engagement with VHS around a proposed action to implement a new Social Prescribing Framework for Scotland. VHS has also been invited to be a member of the new Advisory Board supporting the Collaboration for Health Equity in Scotland (CHES) work in partnership with PHS and Professor Sir Michael Marmot's Institute for Health Equity.

One challenge identified was the duplication of efforts in data collection across different organisations. Many participants stressed the need for a more co-ordinated approach that leverages existing third-sector insights rather than duplicating research. Establishing clear, open channels for communication and collaboration will be essential to making Scotland's public health system more efficient and effective.

Prevention and Long-Term Planning

There was widespread agreement that a shift towards preventative health measures is crucial for ensuring a healthier population. Prevention must be embedded at the heart of Scotland's health strategy, addressing the root causes of ill health rather than focusing solely on treatment. Participants pointed to the importance of

investing in primary and community care services, which can help alleviate the burden on hospitals and emergency services.

Discussions also centred on the importance of taking a long-term approach to reform. While the Population Health Framework lays out a vision for the next decade, short-term action plans spanning 12-18 months are necessary to ensure momentum is maintained and key interventions are implemented without delay and ideally up to and beyond the 2026 election cycle. Striking the right balance between immediate action and long-term strategic thinking will be key to the success of Scotland's health and social care transformation.

Sustainable Funding

A significant concern raised during the discussion was the need for stable, long-term funding to support Scotland's health initiatives. Many participants expressed frustration over the uncertainty surrounding funding cycles, which often leave third-sector organisations struggling to sustain vital services. Ensuring that funding structures are predictable and reliable will allow public health initiatives to have a more lasting impact.

Equity in Access

The conversation also explored Scotland's health inequalities, with participants debating whether public health strategies should focus more on the most vulnerable communities. A focus on geographical areas may result in losing communities of individuals who also face health inequalities - i.e. those with sight loss - and that this needed to be explored.

Preventative spending is particularly crucial in addressing the stark health disparities between Scotland's wealthiest and most deprived areas. Additionally, there were discussions about the impact of commercial behaviours on public health, including the rise of gambling-related harms and the growing privatisation of essential services such as dental, optical, and audiology care. Ensuring equitable access to these services will be critical in promoting health outcomes for all.

Data-Driven Decision-Making and Real-Time Learning

The need for better use of data and real-time learning was another key theme of the discussion. Policies must be informed by both quantitative data and lived experiences from communities and third-sector organisations. Public Health Scotland was encouraged to develop more agile, real-time learning methods that allow for swift adjustments to strategies based on emerging evidence.

Attendees highlighted that siloed data collection has hindered Scotland's ability to implement truly effective public health strategies. Breaking down barriers between different sectors and improving data-sharing mechanisms will be essential in fostering a more responsive and adaptive approach to public health.

Tackling Health Inequalities: A Call to Action

A key message from the discussion was that health inequalities are not inevitable – change is possible, and we have the tools to make a real difference. The social determinants of health, including income, housing, education, and employment, are

factors that can be influenced by strong policies and targeted interventions. Many of the communities most affected by these inequalities are in areas of high deprivation, making it essential to think creatively about solutions that will drive meaningful change.

There was a shared sense of urgency in addressing these disparities: trends in health inequalities can be reversed through bold and ambitious action. Effective interventions already exist, and with the right investment and commitment, Scotland has the opportunity to close the health gap and create a more equitable system for all. Public Health Scotland has demonstrated a commitment to ongoing engagement with Voluntary Health Scotland and its members; the next stage of this will be a [consultation event](#) to enable Voluntary Health Scotland members to feed into Public Health Scotland's new strategy.

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