

National Care Service plans criticised by West Lothian councillors

Proposals to set up a National Care Service in Scotland have been criticised by West Lothian councillors.

One of Scotland's largest local council unions – the GMB – this week withdrew its support for the plans.

And a meeting of West Lothian's Executive heard claims that it will potentially cost an extra £1.5bn to establish a centralised service managed by Holyrood ministers.

Linlithgow Lib Dem councillor Sally Pattle said: "Show us the money and we can deal with it ourselves."

And council leader Councillor Lawrence Fitzpatrick branded the plan as a "frightening massive centralisation".

The Labour group leader added: "What we needed was a clear set of criteria for qualifications needed for certain types of work in social policy and social care, a salary structure to support it and finally a clear inspection arrangement for both public and private sector. Full stop.

"What we are talking about is an extra spend of £1.5 billion setting up offices...there are 150 civil servants continuing to work on it."

The GMB union has claimed the National Care Service Bill – which is facing a number of substantial amendments at stage

two – will not compel care providers to fairly pay staff, leading to 79% of members backing plans to withdraw support.

Ministers agreed earlier this year to relinquish some control over the final system, instead sharing responsibility with local government. Local representation and would still be controlled by ministerial influence.

This month the Council Executive in Livingston approved what were described as “diplomatic” responses to the latest Scottish Government consultation on the plans.

Council officers suggested: “The response highlights that there is no clear, evidence-base that indicates that the proposed major structural change will result in the improvement required.”

It added: “The draft response notes that structural change imposed without additional resources is unlikely to result in any change in the level and quality of services offered to people across Scotland.”

Councillor Pattle criticised the suggestion that new local boards be created – when the existing Local Integration Boards were only created in 2015.

The new boards would, she said: “potentially remove any local accountability.”

Councillor Pattle said: “The icing on the cake for me was, and I quote: “There remain a small number of areas needing further work, including direct funding’. I think we can all agree that is code for removing local participation and council and health boards having any ability to make decisions.”

She added: “There is no evidence that a National Care Service will deliver the reform that we can all agree is needed. What we actually need is plain long-term investment. We just need the Scottish Government to show us the money at a local

government and local health board level and we can deal with this ourselves.”

Labour’s Danny Logue said millions of pounds were being wasted “trying to reinvent the wheel.”

And Linlithgow’s Tom Conn called on the Scottish Government to “lock these plans in a cupboard and quietly walk away.”

SNP depute leader Pauline Stafford raised an amendment suggesting softening the tone of the responses and rejection of an outright blanket ban on suggestions that children’s services and Justice Social work come into a new National Care service remit.

Councillor Stafford reminded Labour councillors that, nationally, the party had supported a National Care Service.

Her SNP colleague from Bathgate, Willie Boyle, castigated Labour councillors for their negativity at the NCS plan: “We need to move things forward. We are being asked to look at how we address a situation that will affect a lot of our constituents. Let’s try and move iron positively.”

A Labour motion approving the council responses to the consultation was backed by councillors.

In January this year West Lothian’s Integrated Joint Board, which oversees health and social care heard that a new National Care service had already cost £2.2bn in development and would be delayed by another three years.

The local board meets again on Tuesday.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter