

West Lothian leader backs CoSLA's rejection of National Care Service plans

West Lothian's leader has backed CoSLA's rejection of the controversial National Care Service plans.

Lawrence Fitzpatrick, a long-term critic of Holyrood centralisation, spoke out as it was revealed the plans had so far cost more than £28m.

CoSLA, the umbrella organisation for Scottish Local Authorities, withdrew its support for the plan on Friday. The organisation's health and social care spokesman, councillor Paul Kelly, said the bill did not represent the work that councils had contributed to the proposals.

On Tuesday Councillor Fitzpatrick, Labour leader of West Lothian told the Local Democracy Reporting Service this week: "The costs are enormous".

Councillor Fitzpatrick urged ministers to listen to local authorities. He told the LDRS: "The Scottish Government must recognise the flaws in their proposals for a National Care Service (NCS).

"Fundamentally, the proposals do not directly address the existing challenges relating to how health and social care services are funded across Scotland."

Councillor Fitzpatrick added: "While we recognise that there is a role for a national approach and consistency in relation to national improvement, standards and oversight it is not clear that this is best progressed through the development of a NCS."

At a recent meeting of the Executive the council rejected the proposals in response to the latest Scottish Government consultation. Local SNP councillors called for a softening of the tone of the response. Depute group leader Pauline Stafford reminded councillors that Labour, nationally, had supported the foundation of NCS.

Announcing the CoSLA decision on Friday, Councillor Kelly said: "Local government is committed to continuing our engagement with key areas of reform which can deliver improved outcomes for people, unpaid carers and our workforce.

"We cannot, however, offer our support for the legislation brought forward at this stage"

Ministers have said they are "extremely disappointed" that some in CoSLA were trying to frustrate progress of the bill which has yet to have its second reading in Holyrood.

Major unions including GMB and Unison also withdrew support for the plan in September.

The plans for the NCS have undergone substantial redraw but still allow little real input by local authorities in the running of health and care services in the future.

This lack of local oversight is at the core of Councillor Fitzpatrick's opposition to the NCS. He told the LDRS: "Local people should be very concerned that the proposals for the National Care Service Board would remove members of a National Care Service Local Board, including locally elected members.

"West Lothian Council would strongly oppose any proposals in

relation to this due to the implications that this would have for local accountability. This is undoubtedly, removing local accountability and decision making from West Lothian and a form of centralising local services.”

“The costs of creating and operating a new national Board with its associated infrastructure are enormous, particularly given the financial challenges facing local and front-line health and social care services are also a major cause for concern.

“The development of the National Care Service will also provide an additional layer of governance and reporting for health and social care services. Such significant changes are not necessary and distract from the significant and urgent investment that is required in social work and social care locally and across Scotland.

“COSLA has undertaken extensive discussions and negotiations with the Scottish Government concerning a number of ongoing challenges and risks in respect of the NCS. There is concern that these negotiations have not resulted in positive outcomes, with a number of matters remaining unresolved, including fundamental disagreement on many areas.”

The Scottish Government confirmed on Tuesday in a written answer to Scottish Tory chairman Craig Hoy that £28,730,224 had been “spent on work related to the NCS”.

The project – which would centralise adult social care and social work into a single body ultimately accountable to ministers – has been beset by delays and uncertainty over costs since it was announced by the Scottish Government in 2022.

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter