

News Budget 2017

Extra £2bn on caring for elderly people is 'short-term solution'

Chris Smyth Health Editor

The crumbling elderly care system has been promised a £2 billion boost over three years, which patients' groups said would simply "buy time" for an overhaul.

Philip Hammond, the chancellor, acknowledged yesterday that the social care system was "under pressure" as it dealt with hundreds of thousands more elderly people at a time when budgets had been cut. Health groups welcomed his promise of a £1 billion cash injection in 2017-18 but warned that it was only half of what was needed to stop standards deteriorating further.

Mr Hammond also promised a green paper this year on a long-term approach to social care. He was urged to ensure that it did not join many previous attempts at reform in gathering dust on Whitehall shelves. He declined to spell out options under consideration other than to rule out a "death tax", the levy on estates mooted by Gordon Brown to pay for elderly care.

Clamour to reform care for the elderly has been mounting after a string of reports about rising numbers being denied help with everyday tasks such as washing and dressing, while councils struggle to pay for care homes.

NHS leaders have warned that hospitals are bursting as elderly patients arrive at A&E, only to be stuck on wards because they cannot be sent home safely without help.

Even as he promised extra cash, Mr Hammond insisted that bed-blocking was not purely about money, pointing out that half of delayed discharges happen in 24 council areas. He called for an improvement in co-ordination.

Richard Murray, of the King's Fund think tank, said: "£1 billion will be enough to make a difference but won't be enough to close the gap to maintain the current service. We should recognise that the government has acted, what's key is that they move quickly now they have acknowledged there is a need for a long-term solution."

"Over the past 20 years there have been 12 white papers, green papers and consultations on social care — this is really difficult to do. If Labour couldn't

Plaster for a nasty wound

Baroness Altmann Comment

The chancellor's announcement of another £2 billion over the next three years for social care is welcome, but this crisis is so grave that far more must be done. The budget was yet another missed opportunity to get to grips with this serious social failure.

Adding some extra funding for cash-strapped councils is not enough. It is just a sticking plaster on a weeping wound that is infecting the whole health service. Longer-term structural reforms are required to tackle this crisis.

Instead, we are promised a green paper later this year that will once again look at how to tackle the inadequacies that have been looked at time and time again but never dealt with.

Rather than more reviews, we need action. It is disappointing that the chancellor did not introduce new help for families to prepare for social care costs. A range of measures, with little or no cost to the exchequer, could be introduced straight away. These could include incentives to help people to save for later life care.

Perhaps special "care Isas" could be passed on free of inheritance tax to the next generation, if not used. Such clear signals are needed so that families know they should plan for some care costs in later life. *Baroness Altmann is a former pensions minister*

do it when the economic sun was shining, can this government? It will be a political judgment on whether the public has come to a realisation that they need to pay a bit more for good care."

Caroline Abrahams, of Age UK, which has complained that care home closures have left half of elderly people without the help they need, said the extra cash was merely a "down payment".

She said: "A crucial question is whether what has been announced today will be enough to make care providers who were considering exiting the market think again, in the hope that a more sustainable approach is on the way. If it isn't then the government's rescue package might well need to be followed by a further bailout for social care later this year."

Councils spend about £16 billion a year on social care, including £2 billion diverted from NHS funds, a cut in real terms of £1.1 billion since 2010. In the same period the population older than 75 has grown by half a million and will increase by a further two million in the next decade.

Andrew McCracken, of the National Voices coalition of charities, said the pledges would buy some time for the social care system. "They are not a long-term fix," he said. "That nettle still needs to be grasped. The current situation remains unacceptable and untenable."

Norman Lamb, the Liberal Democrat health spokesman, said the measures were woefully inadequate. "There will be a £2 billion black hole in social care funding next year alone, yet the Government plans to stretch this amount across three years. This will mean more elderly people going without the care they need and more pressure on our hospitals."