

Scotland 2026: Six steps for a healthier nation



Six steps for a healthier nation

Scotland's health and social care services are in crisis

Occupational therapists are a vital part of Scotland's health and social care system, with more than 4,000 HCPC registered practitioners working across communities. They help people live healthier, more independent lives and they're key to building a fair, sustainable country.

Scotland's health and social care services are in crisis. More people are living longer with long-term conditions, driving demand. Almost four in ten adults report a health condition that limits daily life and life expectancy here is lower than in other parts of the UK and Western Europe.

Occupational therapists work across every stage of life: supporting premature babies and families, helping children thrive at school, enabling people to work and supporting older people to stay active and independent. They help people overcome challenges, build wellbeing and take part in the activities they need, want and love to do.

Right now, occupational therapy (OT) services are under pressure. Recruiting and keeping staff is tough, many posts are unfilled and, in some areas, vacancies are higher than any other health professions. This puts extra strain on teams and risks burnout.

Planning ahead is harder without good data. There's no single source on workforce numbers or waiting times, making effective planning difficult.

All of this is happening while budgets are tight, demand keeps growing and investment is limited.

To meet these challenges, services need to change. Placing more occupational therapy in communities and primary care can make a real difference – while hospitals and specialist services continue to provide essential care for those who need it.

The next Scottish Government must

1 Refocus resources to strengthen community-based teams

Fully resource community occupational therapy teams delivering prevention and early intervention.

2 Expand entry routes to build a sustainable workforce

Grow the workforce from the ground up through apprenticeships and equitable learner support.

3 Improve workforce planning and data for better decisions

Develop national planning tools based on population needs, backed by targeted investment in recruitment, retention and training.

4 Invest in tools and technology to deliver better outcomes

Provide the data systems and technology our workforce needs to deliver great care.

5 Support research and innovation to advance practice

Enable occupational therapists to build evidence, generate new ideas and improve outcomes.

6 Equip the profession to meet sustainability challenges

Help the workforce adapt to climate and sustainability demands so they remain resilient and future ready.

Right Support, Right Time: Unlocking the Power and Occupational Therapy

Timely occupational therapy prevents crises, reduces hospital admissions and tackles health inequalities. Our Right Support, Right Time campaign calls for OT to be embedded in communities, schools, housing and workplaces – so people get help before problems escalate.



Join us and make change happen: www.rcot.co.uk/RightTimeOT



Refocus resources to strengthen community-based teams

1



What must the next government do?

Ensure community occupational therapy teams delivering prevention and early intervention are fully resourced.

What action is needed?

- Expand and invest in occupational therapists in primary care, community rehabilitation and reablement teams including the Home First Agenda and Hospital at Home teams.
- Protect and strengthen children and young people's specialist services – including Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) – to support the future population to flourish.
- Ensure local authority occupational therapy teams are funded and supported, with support from the National Social Work Partnership.

Strengthening community-based occupational therapy teams means more people get support earlier – preventing problems from becoming more complex and easing pressure on hospitals and specialist services.

Occupational therapists are the only profession working across health, social care and housing. They're key to joining up services and building partnerships that deliver better outcomes for people – including supporting people to stay in, return to or move into work.

By focusing on prevention and early intervention, we can help people live healthier, more independent lives in their own homes and communities. This approach doesn't just improve lives – it makes better use of Scotland's limited health and social care resources.

Why this is vital for Scotland

More people will get the support they need sooner, preventing problems from escalating and reducing hospital admissions.



Reablement occupational therapy: Glasgow HSCP

Challenge

Many people leaving hospital or experiencing a crisis need short-term, targeted support to rebuild independence and avoid long-term packages of care.

Approach

A dedicated Reablement OT service within the Care Services Assessment Team provides intensive, short-term intervention across three localities. OTs work with homecare managers and trained care teams to set goals, deliver functional rehab (mobility, personal care practice, equipment provision) and support positive risk-taking that restores confidence.

Bobby regained his independence after hospital admission for confusion and self-neglect, thanks to intensive OT support, environmental changes and rehabilitation – **saving around £30,500 a year in care costs.**

**£8m
annual
savings**

Impact

This early intervention model reduces demand and sustains independence: 40% of people completing reablement no longer need homecare; 20% need reduced support. The service delivers an estimated £8 million in annual savings by preventing unnecessary long-term care.

Why it matters

Fully resourced community OT teams deliver prevention and early intervention, easing pressure on hospitals and specialist services and making better use of Scotland's limited health and social care resources.

Early intervention saves money

- £8 million saved each year by preventing long-term care
- £30,500 saved each year in Bobby's case



Expand entry routes to build a sustainable workforce

2



What must the next government do?

Build a sustainable workforce from the ground up to meet the needs of our communities. This includes expanding routes into the profession – including developing apprenticeship programmes. And provide equitable support for learners, so the workforce is supported, resilient and fit for the future.

What action is needed?

- Develop graduate apprenticeship programmes for occupational therapy.
- Provide financial support to our learners, ensuring equity with nursing and paramedicine learners.
- Ensure parity of pay and conditions across NHS and local authority settings.

To meet Scotland's future needs, we need to grow the occupational therapy workforce from the ground up. Starting with inspiring school leavers, investing in learners and creating clear, supported routes into the profession including developing graduate apprenticeship programmes.

Occupational therapy must be open to people from all backgrounds. This includes supporting learners in remote and rural communities to access education, placements and career development, and tackling barriers such as travel, delivery routes and costs that can make learning harder.

Occupational therapy must be open to people from all backgrounds

But it's not just about numbers. Occupational therapists need fair access to career development and leadership opportunities. Allied Health Professionals should have equal access to advanced clinical roles, specialist posts and leadership positions across NHS and local authority settings. Pre-registration occupational therapy students should also receive fair bursary support, in line with nursing and paramedicine, so the profession is open to everyone.

Why this is vital for Scotland

A stronger, more diverse workforce ready to meet Scotland's growing health and care needs.



We also need to close the gap between NHS and local authority roles. Differences in pay and progression currently limit opportunities for occupational therapists in local authorities, drawing people away from vital early intervention and prevention roles.

By investing in people now, we can build a strong, sustainable workforce for the future and make sure occupational therapy can meet Scotland's growing needs and deliver everyday breakthroughs for communities.

Differences in pay and progression limit opportunities for occupational therapists



Improve workforce planning and data for better decisions

3



What must the next government do?

Create national workforce planning tools based on population needs, backed by targeted investment in recruitment, retention and training. This will secure a strong pipeline of occupational therapists for today and tomorrow.

What action is needed?

- Collect workforce data consistently across NHS and local authority services at a national level and make it accessible for workforce planning.
- Develop a professional judgement tool to guide safe staffing levels in line with other health professions.
- Set minimum staffing requirements based on population need.

Scotland needs a clear, coordinated plan to make sure we have enough occupational therapists now and in the future. That means using population data to spot where support is needed most and matching this with the right number of trained professionals.

For that, we need to invest in recruitment, retention and training.

Why this is vital for Scotland

Smarter staffing decisions that secure the right number of occupational therapists now and in the future.



Whole school OT approach: NHS Lothian

Challenge

A school in an area of high deprivation faced long OT waiting lists and growing needs, impacting classroom participation and home routines.

Approach

OTs engaged school leadership for a strategic reset and embedded practical, universal support across classrooms. This included whole school training on classroom-based learner engagement and the co-design of environmental adaptations with learners, parents and staff. Updated resources were also provided to ensure new staff could continue the approach consistently.

**85%
drop in OT
requests**

Impact

OT requests dropped sharply from 20 to three in 2022/23 and have remained low since (six in 2023/24 and three in 2024/25). Staff, parents and learners reported better alertness, calmer behaviour and improved readiness to learn. The model is now being rolled out to other schools, creating capacity for targeted OT where it's most needed.

Why it matters

Placing OT expertise upstream in communities and schools prevents issues from escalating, reduces waiting lists and builds sustainable capacity by upskilling the people closest to learners.

OT building capacity for teachers

- 85% drop in OT requests
- Referrals fell from 20 to 3 in year one



Invest in tools and technology to deliver better outcomes

4



What must the next government do?

Provide the technology and data systems our workforce needs to deliver great care and achieve everyday breakthroughs.

What action is needed?

- Implement a national system so data and records can be shared safely across health and social care – supporting consistent evaluation and benchmarking.
- Fund digital front door tools such as Connect Me and Near Me to allow the workforce to work efficiently and flexibly.

Occupational therapists in Scotland still rely on outdated systems, technology and sometimes equipment within their services. This means that their ability to deliver effective services is limited and often results in duplication of work which increases waiting lists and does not lead to improved outcomes.

To deliver high-quality, person-centred care, occupational therapists need the right tools and technology. That means modern, reliable IT systems, accurate data, and the ability to share information easily across health and social care.

When digital systems work well, they save time, support collaboration and help occupational therapists make informed decisions. This means people get the right support sooner and can live healthier, more independent lives.

Why this is vital for Scotland

Faster, more efficient care powered by modern systems save time and improve collaboration.



Vocational rehabilitation: NHS Lothian Work Support Services

Challenge

Employees with emerging health concerns risked deteriorating to sickness absence, with personal, employer and system impacts.

Approach

The service provides rapid access vocational rehabilitation, enrolling most employees within days. Interventions focus on job retention: pragmatic workplace adjustments, graded activity, symptom management and liaison with managers to keep people safely in work.

Impact

Between May 2022–October 2023, 135 employees (38.7%) were still at work at referral and 100% remained in work after completing OT intervention. Outcome tracking evidences prevention, informs planning and quantifies the system benefits of early support.

Why it matters

Robust data and proven outcomes enable smarter decisions: targeted investment in preventative, work-focused OT keeps people in employment, reduces sickness absence and supports fairer, healthier communities.

OT keeps people in work

- 100% of those still in work at referral remained in work after OT
- 38.7% were still working at point of referral – preventing deterioration

100%
remained
in work



Support research and innovation to advance practice

5



What must the next government do?

Enable occupational therapists to develop new ideas, build the evidence base and improve outcomes for people and communities.

What action is needed?

- Fund occupational therapists to undertake research.
- Ensure protected time for occupational therapists across NHS Boards and local authorities to be involved in and undertake research and innovation projects.
- Strengthen the partnership between NHS and local authority workforce, universities and research institutions to allow them to grow the evidence base.

Occupational therapists are committed to improving care and making services better for everyone, but they need the right support to turn ideas into action. Limited time, funding and opportunities to share learning can hold back research and innovation.

By giving occupational therapists the time, resources and support they need, we empower them to lead research and drive innovation. This enables them to share new ideas across health and social care, build on proven approaches and strengthen services. The result is better outcomes and life-changing breakthroughs that people rely on every day.

Why this is vital for Scotland

Evidence-based breakthroughs make services better and improve lives across Scotland.



Therapy-led discharge: NHS Highland, Raigmore Hospital

Challenge

Unnecessary admissions and extended stays increase bed pressure, particularly for people aged 65 and over, when functional needs could be met safely at home.

Approach

A five-week pilot (March–April 2025) implemented functional criteria for discharge in the emergency department. OT and physiotherapy led needs-based assessments and enabled discharge with proportionate care at home.

Impact

Over five weeks, the pilot saved 1,100 bed days – around £300,000 savings. Projected across a year: 11,440 bed days could be saved, 9% of unscheduled inpatient bed days for people 65 and over, equating to roughly £3.1 million in savings. Recruitment is underway to make this a permanent role.

**£300k
savings**

**1,100
bed days
saved in
5 weeks**

Why it matters

Therapy-led discharge moves support closer to home, prevents avoidable admissions and uses clear data to make the case for sustainable service change.

OT led discharge frees hospital capacity

- 1,100 bed days saved in five weeks
- £300,000 costs saved in the pilot
- Projected 11,440 bed days saved per year
- Equivalent to ~£3.1 million savings each year



Equip the profession to meet sustainability challenges

6



What must the next government do?

Help the workforce adapt and respond to climate and sustainability challenges, so services remain resilient and future ready.

What action is needed?

- Take a 'digital first' approach wherever possible to reduce travel and save green miles (including NHS Near Me).
- Build environmental literacy across the workforce to support greener ways of working.
- Embed a 'Reduce, Reuse, Reprocess, Renew, Recycle' approach in organisational operations.

The climate and sustainability crisis is one of the biggest challenges facing our communities and health services.

Occupational therapists need support to adapt their practice and help people live healthier, more resilient lives.

The next Scottish Government must provide training, guidance and resources on sustainable approaches in health and social care. To do this, health and care services need to be supported to reduce waste, promoting energy-efficient solutions and making smarter choices about equipment – so we avoid low-cost items that wear out quickly.

Sustainability should shape the future of housing adaptations. A more flexible approach can unlock properties that were previously overlooked, especially when housing stock is limited. By equipping occupational therapists to lead on these changes, we can protect the environment while continuing to deliver high-quality care.

Why this is vital for Scotland

Greener, more resilient services protect the environment and support healthier communities.





We're RCOT, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. We've championed the profession and the people behind it for over 90 years; and today, we are thriving with over 36,000 members.

Then and now, we're here to help achieve life-changing breakthroughs for our members, for the people they support and for society as a whole.

**Help us turn these steps
into meaningful change.**

Visit: rcot.co.uk/Scotland26

**Talk to us about working
together: hello@rcot.co.uk**

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