

Eleanor Smith (MP Wolverhampton South West) also stated that she was not an expert on social care, having served many years in the NHS as a nurse. She too recalled the loss of long term beds from the NHs in the early 1990s:

“We used to have hospitals and services that looked after elderly people. We remember. It has been eroded.”

There is now a debate to be had on where social care should lie – local government or NHS. Eleanor stressed the dangers of local government powers and budgets being further eroded by central government.

Eleanor went on to offer support – perhaps through booking rooms in the House of Commons where further debate could take place, and assisting campaigners to reach out to other MPs to draw them into the discussion.

“I personally believe we can afford free social care - look at what happened after World War Two in 1948. And I believe social care could be part of the NHS.”

Judy Downey, CEO of the Relatives and Residents Association, explained the origins and basis of the campaign, and the fact that anyone fighting to improve social care will find themselves up against the large private companies that dominate much of the nursing home provision, and which despite continued claims that they are under-funded are generating very high profits.

Connor McGurran from UNISON’s North West Region ‘Dignity in Care Campaign’ made clear that none of the surpluses benefit low paid, highly exploited staff often working long, but unpredictable hours, while companies are raking in profits of 13%.

“Social care is being bled dry by hedge funds and aggressive anti-union companies, while care workers are overworked, underpaid and exploited,”

Connor gave the example of one worker’s punishing rota - including 48 visits, shifts as long as 17 and even 21 hours, with virtually no pause between them, and visits to clients of even less than 15 minutes with a number of FIVE MINUTE care visits, and more than one scheduled at just ONE minute!

Explaining UNISON’s campaign to recruit and organise care workers, fight for recognition and improve conditions, stressed that care workers also need proper training in meeting the needs of so many people with serious and often multiple health conditions.

A speech was read out to the conference on behalf of **Bob Williams-Findlay, a founder member of Birmingham Disability Rights Group and “Being the Boss” / Reclaim our Futures**, who was unwell and unable to attend in person.

He argued strongly that social support must be on an equal basis of esteem, and Language is also important; In the case of many disabled people the word “care” is simply inappropriate, and perceived as a way of keeping people in a subordinate position. Attitudes and behaviour found within society present major barriers for a variety of people with significant impairments.

What is needed is assistance in basic tasks, but also in many cases helping to assist with hostile social environments, thus enabling people to determine their own lifestyles and levels of independence.

“Social inclusion is the key to developing the support and assistance people need, and involvement of Users’ voices must be there in future planning and delivery of care.”

Jan SHORTT, General Secretary of the National Pensioners Convention reported that the NPC had been having substantial debate about the type of social care system we need, and eager to work with others to widen that debate and develop a campaign.

There were issues about integration with health care, with some good models and some bad ones.

There had also been discussion about the need for a National Care Agency to tackle the “postcode lottery” of unequal services in different areas, but again discussion was needed on where it should lie in relation to NHS and local government..

Noting that 50% of people in care homes are self-funding their care, Jan argued:.

“Care must be free at point of use, publicly funded and publicly accountable. We have to stop money going to Cayman Islands to funds that helped pay for this Government We need dignity and respect and a better quality of life.

And social care needed a system of funding that is fair for all.

Gill Ogilvie, a GMB regional organiser who had been actively campaigning around cuts in children’s services and day care nurseries pointed to the impact of the failure by many local authorities to meet their statutory duty to provide transport for children to get to school.

Gill also spoke about the issues being highlighted by Children’s Grief Awareness Week.

As an addition to the agenda, the conference also have a welcome to a delegation of Birmingham care worker strikers, whose dispute was still unresolved. The level of anger at the issues at stake was indicated by the 57% turnout and 97% vote for strike action. The strike had been triggered by punitive changes to rotas which severely undermined the income of care staff and their ability to get other part time work.