Headway
the brain injury association

Prioritising brain injury survivors and services

Our manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament election

Introduction

Brain injury can challenge every aspect of your life – walking, talking, thinking, and feeling – and the losses can be severe and permanent. It can mean losing both the life you once lived and the person you once were. We all think 'it will never happen to me', but a brain injury can happen to anyone, at any time. When it does, Headway is here to help.

Every 25 minutes someone is admitted to hospital with a brain injury in Scotland. That's around 57 people a day. In 2023/24 alone, there were 20,873 admissions. Whether resulting from head trauma, stroke, a brain tumour or another cause, a brain injury can profoundly alter how a person thinks, feels, and behaves - often for life. Yet access to specialist rehabilitation and support, both at the acute phase and in particular within local communities, is inconsistent, inadequate and underfunded, leaving brain injury survivors, carers and families without the help they need to rebuild their lives and regain their independence.

Six active local Headway brain injury charities and six volunteer-led branches provide support to brain injury survivors across Scotland. Together, Scotland's network of Headway charities and branches, supported by Headway UK, provide vital community-based services including rehabilitation programmes, carer support, social re-integration, community outreach and respite care to survivors and families in their own communities. They range significantly in their service provision, largely due to a lack of consistent and sustainable funding.

Brain injury survivors across Scotland face significant challenges including appropriate and timely access to rehabilitation services, pressures on local services including those provided by local Headway charities, care and support issues, and limited understanding and awareness of brain injury.

Action is overdue – the Scottish Parliament and Government must act decisively to prioritise brain injury survivors and the lifeline services they depend on.

1. Fix and equalise access to rehabilitation

Everyone in Scotland who acquires a brain injury should have access to the appropriate, timely and effective healthcare they need to rebuild their lives. But in reality, support differs significantly between regions, meaning a person's recovery prospects often depend more on their postcode than their clinical needs.

Postcode lotteries across Scotland:

Access to rehabilitation varies widely by location across Scotland. Some areas benefit from well-resourced, multi-disciplinary services, while others lack basic provision. Care quality for brain injury survivors also differs significantly between areas. Differences in specialist skills, follow-up, and care planning mean many people do not get the support they need.

These effects are pronounced in rural Scotland. People far from major trauma centres with a serious brain injury often face delays reaching specialist acute care and, after discharge, have poorer access to ongoing neurorehabilitation and support due to distance and service gaps.

These variabilities extend to vocational rehabilitation. Survivors who can and want to work face unnecessary barriers, despite strong evidence that vocational rehabilitation is effective and improves return-to-work outcomes.

Furthermore, these challenges are compounded by inconsistent mental health provision. Brain injury can directly cause poor mental health and isolation, yet in Scotland, two out of three adults living with a neurological condition[1], including brain injury, say life is difficult to cope with and their condition has an impact on their mental health and ability to work.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Scottish Government should:

1. Introduce a Scotland-wide brain injury plan to ensure consistent, timely and high-quality rehabilitation.
2. Work with expert stakeholders to create and enhance vocational rehabilitation opportunities for brain injury survivors.
3. Start a national review of brain injury rehabilitation and other relevant care to identify gaps and inequalities.
4. Guarantee consistent access to mental health support, including through recruiting more neuropsychologists.

2. Invest in local brain injury reablement services

Each brain injury is different. Some people regain independence, while others live with severe, lifelong effects. Across Scotland, local Headway charities and branches provide essential community-based support to help survivors and their families cope. But many of these vital services are facing significant pressures due to a chronic lack of sustainable funding.

Local services under pressure:

Local Headway charities and volunteer-led branches across Scotland provide vital community-based reablement services and activities, including day support, recreational rehab suites and social rehabilitation, often described as lifelines by those who benefit from them. However, these crucial services face considerable challenges that put their long-term sustainability at risk.

Two Scottish Headway charities have stopped operating and are closing for good in part due to these pressures. The next Scottish Government must invest in these vital services that play a crucial role in increasing independence and reducing reliance on more costly state-funded support.

Charities need essential core funding to sustain themselves to carry out projects across Scotland. But funding is often short-term and insecure, making services difficult to sustain even where demand is clear. These issues are compounded by persistent challenges in securing trustees and volunteers in some areas.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Scottish Government should:

1. Without delay, provide urgent financial support for local community-based rehabilitation and reablement services.
2. Increase and ringfence funding for community-based specialist brain injury services, such as those provided by Headway.
3. Work with third-sector organisations to ensure a sustainable future for organisations stepping in to provide vital services.
4. Build on the Scottish Government's Volunteering Action Plan to encourage dedicated volunteers with capacity and means to give their time.

3. Enhance care and support to improve wellbeing and independence

People in Scotland living with brain injury often have rapidly changing, complex needs, but social care is slow, confusing and hard to access. Many survivors wait too long or receive inadequate support, leaving families and unpaid carers under huge pressure.

Limited support for survivors and carers:

Many people with brain injury in Scotland live independently, but others develop complex needs that can change rapidly. Too often, the adult social care system is slow, fragmented and hard to navigate, leaving it unable to respond at the pace people require. Care packages are being cut, while staff shortages in social care and limited understanding of the complex, and often hidden, needs of brain injury survivors are making matters worse.

Paid social care is only one pillar of support. Around 800,000 unpaid carer in Scotland[2] – including many supporting people with brain injury – shoulder an enormous responsibility, often at significant personal cost. Families provide vital day-to-day care, yet too often they lack clear information, meaningful involvement in decisions, and practical help.

Local Headway charities and branches provide vital support, offering carers advice, activities and peer networks. Since 2011, Headway's UK-wide Emergency Fund has provided more than £32,000 to families in Scotland to help them manage the sudden practical challenges that follow a brain injury. However, local charity services are under significant pressure and need sustained investment and recognition to continue supporting both survivors and carers.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Scottish Government should:

1. Commit to sustainable, long-term increased social care funding to ensure brain injury survivors receive the support required for fulfilling lives.
2. Improve social care staffing levels and provide mandatory training for staff to understand and support the unique needs of survivors.
3. Establish an accessible grant scheme, based on Headway's Emergency Fund, to assist families in the immediate aftermath of a brain injury, and ensure families can stay close to survivors in specialist neurorehabilitation units.
4. Enhance access to counselling and other support services such as respite for family members affected by brain injury.

4. Strengthen brain injury understanding, awareness and data collection

Scotland lacks the consistent data needed to understand the true scale of acquired brain injury. Until this improves, services cannot effectively plan or deliver coordinated support. This data gap mirrors a wider lack of awareness, underscoring the urgent need for improving understanding and prevention of brain injuries.

Lack of understanding, awareness and data:

Scotland needs better data on acquired brain injury across health, social care and wider public services. Key information gaps include who presents to GPs, what happens after hospital discharge, and how many people go on to access rehabilitation, social care and benefits.

These gaps are compounded by structural barriers to accessing existing data. In Scotland, organisations must pay Public Health Scotland more than £1,000 to obtain basic hospital admissions data, whereas comparable data is provided free of charge in Wales and Northern Ireland.

This weak data picture reinforces wider problems of limited understanding and awareness of brain injury. In particular, the hidden and fluctuating impacts of brain injury could be better recognised across different settings, including education, sports, prisons, and welfare assessments (including for Adult Disability Payments), as well as within health and social care. For example, studies of police custody staff identify a need for further training on brain injury[3], especially in relation to assessment, early management and long-term effects. Improving data, understanding and awareness is essential both to support people living with brain injuries now and to help prevent brain injuries in the future.

To support brain injury survivors, the next Scottish Government should:

1. Introduce a single, Scotland-wide framework to record brain injury consistently alongside national mapping of NHS and non-NHS brain injury services, including community support levels, to identify gaps in rehabilitation.
2. Launch a public awareness campaign to educate about the impacts of brain injury alongside targeted awareness activity concerning education, the criminal justice system, benefits assessments, and other areas, ultimately aiming to reduce stigma, enhance support, and improve prevention.
3. Require Public Health Scotland to make hospital admissions statistics freely available to charities.
4. Ensure that frontline public service staff interacting with brain injury survivors receive specialised mandatory training on understanding brain injury, alongside accessible training for non-government organisations.

Conclusion:

Brain injury can happen in an instant, but recovery and rebuilding a life takes years.

Over the course of the next Scottish Parliament, over 100,000 people will be admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury. The new Parliament and Scottish Government must do more to ensure no survivor faces that journey alone. By strengthening prevention, improving data, investing in local community-based services and rehabilitation, as well as supporting families and carers, the next government can transform outcomes for thousands of people every year. Headway and our network of local charities and volunteer-led branches stand ready to play our part – but we cannot do it without national action.

Together, we can build a Scotland where every brain injury survivor gets the understanding, support and opportunity they deserve.

References:

[1] Neurological Alliance of Scotland (2025) Today's Challenge, Tomorrow's hope. Available at: https://www.scottishneurological.org.uk/file-download/91/today%E2%80%99s-challenge,-tomorrow%E2%80%99s-hope-(july-2025).pdf.

[2] New figures show the staggering value of unpaid carers in Scotland (2024) Carers UK. Available at: https://www.carersuk.org/press-releases/new-figures-show-the-staggering-value-of-unpaid-carers-in-scotland/

[3] McMillan, T.M. (2022) 'Knowledge about head injury in police custody staff and implications for training', Forensic Science International: Mind and Law, 3, pp. 100–105.

Contact us about our 2026 Scottish Parliament election manifesto by emailing:
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If you need help or support, or have a question about brain injury, contact our freephone nurse-led helpline:

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Headway – the brain injury association is registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales [Charity No. 1025852] and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (Charity No. SC 039992).
Headway – the brain injury association is a company limited by guarantee registered in England [No. 2346893].