An estimated 850,000 people currently live with dementia in the UK: 1 in 79 of the UK population and 1 in 14 of those aged 65 years or over.\textsuperscript{1}

Dementia predominantly afflicts people aged over 65 years of age and the UK’s population is ageing – fast. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that from 1974 to 2014 the median age of the UK population jumped from 33.9 years to 40.0 years, making the UK population at its oldest ever.\textsuperscript{2} The trend is likely to continue as health care maintains longer life.

The impact of rising levels of dementia are widespread and profound – on those living with dementia and their carers, on the health service and on society at large, as carers are unable to work and the NHS runs out of beds.

The Alzheimer’s Society head of policy, George McNamara, says: ‘Dementia is now the biggest killer of people over 65, with an estimated 225,000 people in the UK developing dementia every year and more than one million expected to be living with the condition by 2025.\textsuperscript{1}

‘The Alzheimer’s Society estimates that dementia costs the UK £26 billion a year. A staggering two thirds of that is paid by people with dementia and their families, either in 1.3 billion hours of unpaid care or in paying for private social care.’\textsuperscript{1}

Patrick Hall, Fellow, Social Care Policy at The King’s Fund, believes the situation can only become worse and says: ‘Unless we can significantly improve the health of older people, ill-health, disability and dementia is (sic) likely to become more common. The Alzheimer’s Society predicts that if no action is taken, the UK will have over two million citizens living with dementia by 2051.’\textsuperscript{1}

McNamara says: ‘The UK Government’s austerity measures have hit people with dementia and their families particularly hard, due to their reliance on social care, more so than state-funded NHS services.’

He adds: ‘Although councils, which have seen their budgets slashed by around 40%, have tried to shield the sector from the cuts, spending on care has fallen in real terms by 11% since 2009.’\textsuperscript{1}

Emily Holzhausen OBE, Carers UK Director of Policy and Public Affairs, provides some background to the figures and says: ‘Since 2001, the growth in numbers of carers has outstripped population growth by 10% and the number of people providing 20–49 hours of care a week has increased by 43%.’\textsuperscript{3}

Holzhausen sees evidence that the rising demand for care combined with the rationing of social care services ‘is resulting in unsustainable pressure on families, who are providing more care than ever before’.

Dave Stevens, Chief Executive of the charity Dementia Care, in Newcastle upon Tyne, sees the growing difficulties at close quarters. He, too, talks of the root cause of problems as ‘a lack of funding for social care, driven by repeated cuts to local authority budgets that are now so severe they are hitting essential services.’

What might a solution look like?

Hall says: ‘Successfully meeting an ageing population’s demands will require a fundamental rethink of how health and care are funded and delivered. This will require real political bravery to establish a lasting consensus.’

Holzhausen says: ‘The Government has established sound principles for supporting carers in the Care Act 2014 and is currently developing a new cross-government Carers Strategy. Improvements to carers’ lives cannot be made without investment to achieve a sustainably funded health and care system able to meet the needs of our ageing population and ensure families have the support they need to care well while looking after themselves too.’

McNamara has welcomed the Government’s announcements that local authorities could raise council taxes over the next two years to tackle the social care crisis, along with the £240 million Social Care Support Grant, but he says: ‘This is only a short-term solution for a long-term problem, and demand will continue to outstrip resources.’

He adds: ‘There has never been a greater need to address the funding crisis to ensure that no one with dementia is left footing the bill unfairly.’

References