Andy Burnham
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street, London,
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02.11.2026

Dear Prime Minister,

Open Letter: Make Good Nutrition Fundamental to the National Care Service

As the National Association of Care Catering (NACC), the leading organisation representing caterers working across the care sector, alongside leaders from across the Care and Public Sector, we urge the Government to make good nutrition and hydration a fundamental pillar of the National Care Service and its preventative health and care ambitions.

As you shape the future through the 10-year NHS plan and National Care Service reforms, one principle must be non-negotiable: **we cannot prevent ill health without good nutrition, support recovery without food, or deliver dignified, person-centred care without ensuring people can eat and drink well.**

Nutrition is not an optional extra. It is a fundamental component of health, independence, recovery and wellbeing. Yet, too often, it remains overlooked in discussions about prevention and the future of social care.

The scale of the challenge demands action. An estimated **1.3 million people aged over 65 in the UK experience malnutrition**, with 93% living in the community. British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (BAPEN) 2023 survey found that 49% of adults screened in their own homes and 42% of those screened in care homes were at risk of malnutrition. These figures expose a significant challenge across the very settings where preventative care should make the greatest difference. Malnutrition among older adults alone is estimated to cost the UK health and social care system £19.6 billion per year: a powerful reminder that failing to act on nutrition itself is enormously costly.

Malnutrition is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. Without appropriate nutritional support, people can lose strength, become increasingly frail, face a greater risk of falls and struggle to recover from illness. The consequences can be devastating for individuals and families, while increasing demand on already stretched health and social care services.

The economic argument for prevention is compelling. Local Government Association research published in November 2024 estimated potential savings of £3.17 for every £1 invested in earlier intervention and preventative support, amounting to £11.1 billion across the public purse. While these estimates relate to prevention more broadly, they reinforce the importance of investing early rather than paying a greater price when people's needs escalate.

Meals on Wheels is prevention in action, and we are at risk of losing it.

Across the country, Meals on Wheels services have steadily disappeared, with further closures threatening access to this vital support. Research undertaken by the University of Bristol in 2026 found that only 21.6% of UK local authority districts retained council-run Meals on Wheels provision, while 34.8% had no identified provision, leaving many older and vulnerable people without a reliable source of nutritious food and regular human contact. Meals on Wheels is far more than a food delivery service. For older people, those living alone, people with disabilities and individuals returning home after a hospital stay, it can be a lifeline. Nationally, 63.3% of local authority districts show high or very high unmet need for meals on wheels, and 57.8% show moderate to very high predicted demand, evidence that postcode continues to determine access.

Alongside a nutritious meal, a regular visit can provide reassurance, a welfare check, meaningful social interaction and an opportunity to identify changes in someone's health or circumstances. Where concerns arise, they can be escalated to the appropriate services.
This combination of nutrition, human connection and early identification of need helps people maintain independence and remain safely in their own homes for longer. It supports unpaid carers, helps tackle loneliness and can identify problems before they develop into crises. These are precisely the outcomes the Government's preventative ambitions seek to achieve.

Yet Meals on Wheels is not a statutory requirement for local authorities. At a time when the Government is rightly emphasising prevention, the loss of these services risks undermining that ambition. **We cannot credibly promise care closer to home while allowing the community services that help people remain at home to disappear.** The Casey Commission provides a direct opportunity to address this.

The Care Act 2014 places individual wellbeing at the heart of adult social care. Access to adequate nutrition and hydration is fundamental to that principle, whether someone lives independently, receives support at home, resides in a care setting or approaches the end of life.

As the Government moves from ambition to implementation, we call for four decisive commitments:

1. **Make nutrition and hydration fundamental to the National Care Service.** Explicitly recognise their role in prevention, recovery, independence, wellbeing and dignity across all adult social care settings.
2. **Protect and invest in preventative nutritional services.** Develop sustainable funding and commissioning arrangements that support Meals on Wheels and other community nutrition services, rather than allowing them to be displaced by immediate financial pressures and crisis-led spending.
3. **Embed nutritional support across health and social care pathways.** Make it integral to hospital discharge, neighbourhood and community services, and the identification and referral of people at risk of malnutrition or dehydration.
4. **Strengthen accountability for nutritional outcomes.** Promote appropriate nutritional screening, personalised care plans and effective monitoring to ensure people receive the support they need to eat and drink well.

Prime Minister, the opportunity is clear. A National Care Service built around prevention must recognise that good nutrition is essential infrastructure for good care. Investing in it means investing in healthier lives, greater independence, stronger communities and a more sustainable health and care system.

We urge you to act now: make nutrition and hydration a visible, funded and measurable priority from the outset of the National Care Service and ensure that Meals on Wheels and community nutritional support are recognised as essential preventative services.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and relevant ministers to discuss how these commitments can be translated into meaningful action.

Yours sincerely,

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National Association of Care Catering (NACC)

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This letter has been counter-signed by other organisations who agree with the content of this open letter;

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