

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee
Tuesday 09 September 2025
22 Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

Pre-Budget Scrutiny: Public Service Reform

1. The [Verity House Agreement](#), signed in 2023, sets out the Scottish Government and Local Government's ambition to "work together strategically to advance public service reform".
2. At its meeting on the 24 June, the Committee agreed to explore how the Scottish Budget supports this as the focus of its pre-Budget scrutiny.

Pre-Budget Scrutiny

3. Pre-Budget scrutiny normally takes place in the months leading up to the Scottish Budget. It aims to:
 - influence how the Budget is prepared;
 - improve transparency and increase public awareness of the Budget;
 - consider how the Scottish Government's Budget for 2026-27 should respond to fiscal and wider policy challenges; and
 - lead to better results and outcomes when compared against the Scottish Government's targets and goals.
4. The Finance and Public Administration Committee has published guidance for committees on Budget Scrutiny for 2026-27.
 - [Budget Process 2026-27: Guidance for Committees](#)

Public Service Reform

5. The Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee has agreed to consider the following themes:
 - How local authorities have been reforming public services in recent years.
 - What is preventing councils from achieving "transformative change"?
 - What impacts have efficiency savings had on service users?
 - The support available to councils trying to reform how they deliver services.
 - Local authority engagement with the Scottish Government's Invest to Save fund, a £30 million fund supporting efforts to catalyse efficiency, effectiveness and productivity projects

- Will the Invest to Save Fund continue and expand in future years?
 - How multi-year funding packages from the Scottish Government could help councils reform
 - How successful is the partnership between the Scottish Government and local government in delivering public service reform?
6. The Committee wrote to the Improvement Service and the Accounts Commission to seek more details on the public service reform. Their responses can be found under following links—
- a. [Letter from the Accounts Commission](#)
 - b. [Letter from the Improvement Service](#)
7. The Committee also wrote to the [Educational Institute of Scotland](#) and [GMB Union](#).

This meeting

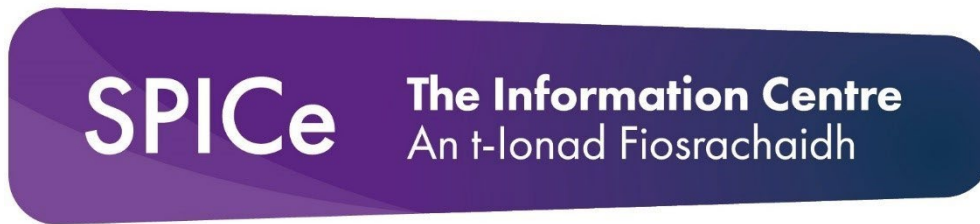
8. At today's meeting, the Committee will take evidence from the following witnesses—
- Ken Gourlay, Chief Executive, Fife Council;
 - Dr Dawn Roberts, Chief Executive, Dumfries and Galloway Council;
 - Thomas Glen, Chief Executive, Perth & Kinross Council;
 - Nikki Bridle, Chief Executive, Clackmannanshire Council; and
 - Malcolm Burr, Chief Executive, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.
9. A briefing from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) is included at **Annexe A**.

Next steps

10. The Committee will take evidence from stakeholders and the Scottish Government.

Clerks to the Committee
September 2025

Annexe



Pre-budget scrutiny 2026-27 briefing: public service reform and local government

Introduction

This briefing provides Members with key financial and performance statistics, trends analysis and information on policy developments relevant to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's pre-budget scrutiny.

Funding trends since 2013

- The local government revenue settlement from the Scottish Government (SG) is now higher in real terms than in 2013-14.
- Over this period, local authorities have been required to do more in the areas of early years provision, free school meals and adult social care.
- Demand across many service areas has also risen due to factors such as demographic change and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Since the signing of the Verity House Agreement (VHA) in summer 2023, the use of formal ring-fencing has reduced significantly.
- There is also a real possibility that local government will receive a multi-year funding package in this year's budget (another aspiration of the VHA).
- This has been a major ask of COSLA (and its third sector partners) for years.
- A fiscal framework document showing what has been agreed between the Scottish Government and COSLA is yet to be published ([see letter from Scottish Government](#)).

Budget gaps

- The Accounts Commission identified a budget gap of £647 million across all local authorities in 2025-26.
- To be filled through raising council tax, using reserves and finding savings.
- There are variations in budget gaps and how councils are addressing them.

Local government costs

- Analysis of spending trends (see [last year's SPICe briefing](#)).

- Local government is the largest public sector employer in Scotland, and the workforce has increased by 5% (+12,000 headcount) since 2019.
- Local authority employment costs across Scotland have increased by 26% in real terms since 2014.
- Employment costs are equivalent to 72% of local government's net revenue expenditure.
- Staff absence levels in local government have risen significantly recently.

Public satisfaction and perception

- Despite “record levels” of funding going to local government, satisfaction with a range of local government services has reduced over the period.
- People also feel less empowered to influence local decisions.

Public service reform in local government

- The Scottish Government published its [Public Service Reform Strategy](#) in June.
- It includes an intention to “reduce spending on corporate functions across public bodies, including the Scottish Government, to deliver £1 billion of savings in five years”.
- The Verity House Agreement includes a joint commitment to “work together strategically to advance public service reform”.
- Public service reform in local government is supported and encouraged by the Accounts Commission and the Improvement Service.
- The Accounts Commission has done extensive work in this field - it has found some good examples of public service reform in some councils.
- With many councils, the Commission has concerns about the pace of change.
- When asked about public service reform and the Scottish Budget in January, the Cabinet Secretary mentioned the Invest to Save Fund.
- There is a relatively small pot of Invest to Save funding available for local authorities (£6m). Grants must be paid back to the Scottish Government from future savings.
- The Scottish Government has just completed a consultation on a general power of competence for local government.
- Some respondents argue that current legislative restrictions may act as a barrier to innovation and public service reform.

Scottish Government revenue allocation to Local Government since 2013

The Scottish Government's revenue allocation to local government in 2025-26 amounts to £14.4 billion. This is £700 million (+5%) more in real terms compared to 2013-14. Over this period there have been some annual reductions, but overall, funding to local government is higher now than it was 12 years ago.

During an evidence sessions on [9](#) and [16 January](#) 2024, both COSLA and local authority directors of finance stressed that local authorities are doing considerably more now than they did in 2013-14, particularly in the areas of early years provision, free school meals and adult social care. COSLA argued that the true costs of new

and enhanced services exceed the additional money allocated by the Scottish Government over the period.

Ringfenced funding accounts for less than 2% of total revenue allocation in 2025-26, the remainder is categorised as “general” revenue funding according to the [Local Government Finance Circular](#). In addition, every local authority increased Council Tax rates this year, and the additional income can be used to fund local priorities.

There is also the real possibility of multi-year funding settlements for local government in this year’s Scottish Budget. In January, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government told the Committee:

“I am very keen to move into a multiyear funding space. First, however, we need to see the outcome of the UK Government spending review. We are expecting the resource and capital spending review around June: I need to see the envelopes that the Scottish Government is likely to receive in order then to be able to make multiyear commitments to local government. I am really keen to do so, because—to go back to the point about reform and sustainability—it is much easier to make the changes that need to be made if we have a line of sight of more than one year of budget, which would mean that we could plan changes over what would, in this case, be a three-year cycle with a review every two years.”

In June, the UK Government published its first [Spending Review since 2021](#). This sets resource spending limits up to 2028-29, and capital spending limits to 2029-30.

The [Verity House Agreement](#) includes the following commitment:

“Through the development of a robust Fiscal Framework, which will include meaningful early budget engagement, the Local Government Settlement will be simplified and consolidated, clear routes to explore local revenue raising and sources of funding will be established, and wherever possible multi-year certainty will be provided to support strategic planning and investment.”

[The Scottish Government’s Medium Term Financial Strategy](#), published in June, includes the following:

“The UK Government published a multi-year spending review on 11 June 2025. This provides the Scottish Government with key information to develop our own multi-year spending plans. Work has already begun on these plans, with the intention that Scottish Ministers publish the conclusions of the spending review exercise in December 2025, alongside the 2026-27 Scottish Budget. These conclusions will supplement the annual budget and we intend to set out the Scottish Government’s indicative spending plans for 2027-28 and 2028-29 for resource, with an additional year (2029-30) for capital.”

This year’s Budget **could** be the first time multi-year settlements have been provided to local authorities since 2012-15 (see [circular 12/2011](#)).

Local authority budget gaps

The Accounts Commission's [May 2025 report on local government budgets](#) found that across Scotland the identified revenue budget gap was £647 million in 2025-26. A budget gap is the difference between anticipated expenditure and the income a council receives.

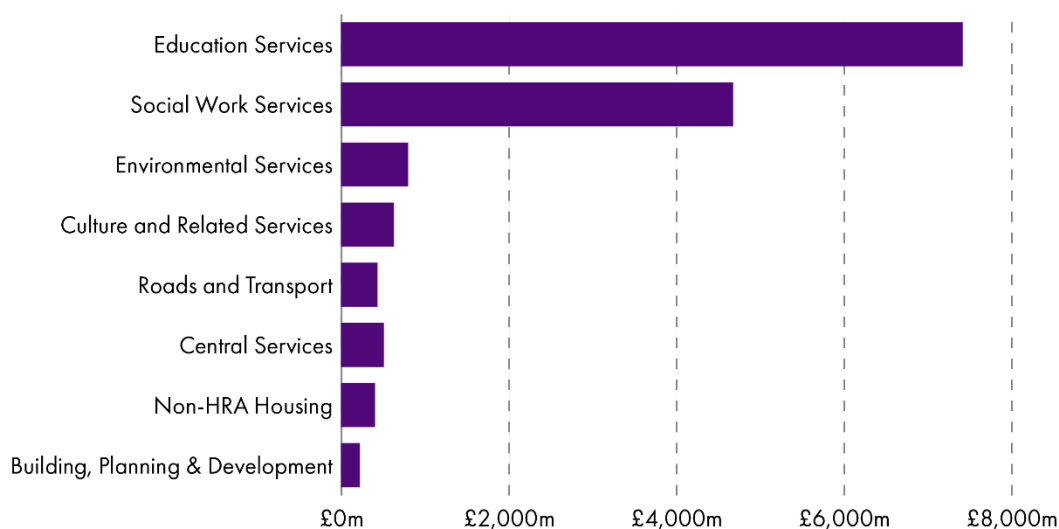
Councils plan to fill their gaps by raising council tax rates, identifying savings, using reserves and increasing/introducing charges for some services.

Most of councils' revenue funding comes from the Scottish Government, with around 61% coming through the General Revenue Grant.

Local government spending trends since 2013-14

The Scottish Government publishes [extensive information on local authority expenditure](#). These sources provide an insight into the spending priorities of local government, and clearly school education and social work/social care are at the top of that list. Of the total net revenue expenditure of £15 billion in 2024-25, around half (£7.4 billion) was spent on education services and a further 31% went to social work services (including social care). This means that around 80% of local government net revenue expenditure is spent on these two service areas.

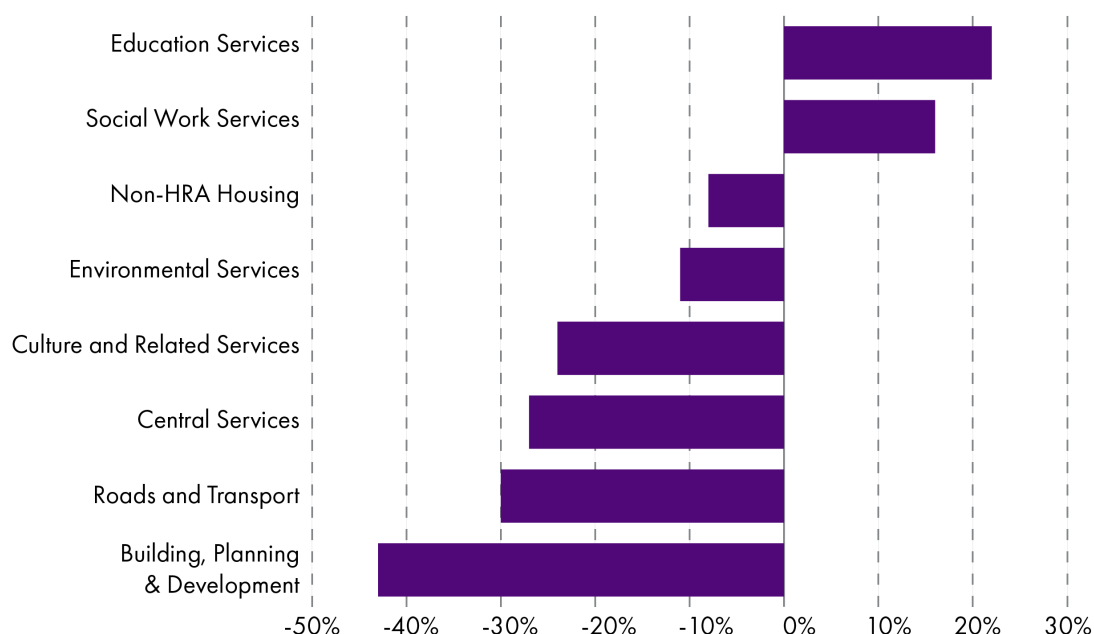
Net Revenue Expenditure for 2024-25 by service, £ millions



Overall, there have been significant real terms increases in the amount of money councils have spent on education and social care between 2013-14 and 2024-25. The graph below shows that it is only these two service areas which have seen increases. Every other service area, from environmental services to planning, have seen significant real terms reductions over the period. The latter, for example, saw a 43% real terms reduction. In 2023, the Accounts Commission concluded:

“Over the last decade, there is a clear divergent pattern of spend. Spending on children’s services (education and looked after children) and adult social care has been protected and increased because of national policy directives. This means that the remaining ‘unprotected’ services have borne a disproportionate level of spending reductions.”

Change in expenditure by service area, 2013-14 to 2024-25 (real terms, %)



As set out in the [last year's SPICe briefing](#), these overall figures for Scotland mask considerable variations at individual local authority level. Comparing Provisional Outturn and Budget Estimate figures for 2013-14 and 2024-25 we see that some local authorities actually increased spending in a particular service area where most other local authorities decided to *reduce* spending.

Local government workforce

According to the most recent [Public Sector Employment Statistics](#), local government employed 214,000 people (FTE) in Quarter 1 2025. This is up 11,000 (+5%) since Quarter 1 2014. Not every local authority has seen an increase in staff numbers over the period. Scottish Borders has seen a reduction of 300 FTEs (-7%) and Na h-Eileanan Siar has seen a reduction of 200 (-11%). Glasgow, on the other hand, has seen an increase of 5,000 (+28%) in their FTEs since 2014.

Spending on workforce across the devolved public sector in Scotland (including local government) is estimated to account for 55% of the entire Scottish resource budget in 2025-26. The recently published [Medium Term Financial Strategy](#) estimates that the pay bill for local government (including teachers) stood at £10.7 billion in 2024-25. This is almost 40% of the total devolved public sector pay bill (£27.4 billion).

A [recent report by the Accounts Commission](#) found that local government employment costs have risen by 26% in real terms since 2014. The same report found that sickness absence days for local authority staff has increased significantly since 2020-21.

During questions on his [statement to Parliament on public service reform](#), the Minister for Public Finance was asked about the balance of staffing levels between national and local government. He responded:

“I would characterise this not in terms of the workforce in central and local government, but in terms of corporate functions and the front-line workforce. The person-to-person, front-line workers who engage with service users are, of course, the most important. This is about shifting the £1 billion in resources [across the whole devolved public sector] from corporate functions to that front-line workforce, and we need to accelerate that work, while working with partners to make that happen in a way that does not cause problems for the system as we are doing it. We want to go as fast as we can, using the tools that I have outlined in the strategy.”

Although talking about the devolved public sector more generally, with 40% of the pay bill being paid by local authorities, this aspiration clearly has implications for local government.

Growing dissatisfaction with local government services

To support senior management teams across local authorities, and help elected councillors ask questions about the performance of council services, the Improvement Service created its [Local Government Benchmarking Framework](#) (LGBF). They collect and present a range of data which helps councils compare performance against a number of indicators covering most areas of local government activity.

The [2023-24 LGBF Annual Report](#) concludes that the Framework “shows how sustained financial, demand and workforce pressures have substantially disrupted performance and efficiency improvements gained in previous years”. The Scottish Government’s Public Sector Reform Strategy states that “despite increased investment, people’s satisfaction with public services is declining”.

There is evidence of declining level of public satisfaction with a range of council services since 2010-11:

Table 2: Public satisfaction with council services across Scotland (%)

	2010-11	2023-24	Change since 2010-11 (% point change)
Schools	83	69	-14
Libraries	84	66	-18
Parks and open spaces	83	84	1
Museums and galleries	76	69	-7
Leisure facilities	75	65	-10
Refuse collection	81	79	-2
Street Cleaning	73	57	-16

Source: [2023-24 LGBF Annual Report](#)

In addition, SPICe's [Facts and Figures briefing](#) discusses trends in performance and satisfaction relating to adult social care services (see page 41).

Public perceptions of local councils

In November 2024, the Scottish Government published [analysis of Scottish Household Survey questions](#) relating to perceptions of local councils (official statistics based on a sample of 10,000 households). Here is a summary of the 2023 findings:

- Survey respondents were asked to agree or disagree with various statements about how their local council is performing. In 2023, 42% of respondents agreed that their local council provides high quality services (5.8% strongly agree; 37% somewhat agree) whereas 29% disagreed.
- When asked if their local council does the best it can with the money available, 42% of respondents agreed, compared to 29% who disagreed (11% strongly disagree; 18% somewhat disagree).
- Approximately 37% of respondents agreed that their local council is good at letting people know about what services it provides, a statistically significant increase from 35% in 2022. However, 20% somewhat disagreed and a further 12% strongly disagreed with this statement.
- Just under a third of respondents (30%) agreed that their council is good at letting people know how well it is performing, which is a statistically significant increase from 27% in 2022. A further 22% of respondents somewhat disagreed with this statement and 13% strongly disagreed.

- In 2023, approximately one third of respondents (31%) agreed that their local council designs its services around the needs of the people who use them. 30% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

The following table shows how responses have changed between 2011 and 2023:

Table 3: percentage of people agreeing with statements

Statement	2011	2023
My local council provides high quality services	44%	42%
My local council does the best it can with the money available	39%	42%
My local council is addressing the key issues affecting the quality of life in my local neighbourhood	34%	33%
My council is good at listening to local people's views before it takes decisions	23%	23%
My local council designs its services around the needs of the people who use them	39%	31%
My council is good at letting local people know how well it is performing	40%	30%
My local council is good at letting people know about what services it provides	49%	37%
I can influence decisions affecting my local area	22%	18%

Source: [Scottish Household Survey 2024](#)

Linked to work the Committee has previously done on community empowerment is the response of 18% of people surveyed who agreed with the statement, “I can influence decisions affecting my local area”.

Public service reform strategy since 2011

The Scottish Government published its new [Public Service Reform Strategy](#) in late June. This includes an intention to “reduce spending on corporate functions across public bodies, including the Scottish Government, to deliver £1 billion of savings in five years”.

In his [statement to Parliament](#), the Minister for Public Finance highlighted the importance of the Christie Commission report, published in 2011, which “called for public services that focus on prevention, place, partnership, people and performance”. He acknowledged that “we have not delivered the Christie approach to its fullest potential”.

The four [principles of the Christie Report](#) are:

- Reforms must aim to empower individuals and communities receiving public services by involving them in the design and delivery of the services they use.
- Public service providers must be required to work much more closely in partnership, to integrate service provision and thus improve the outcomes they achieve.
- We must prioritise expenditure on public services which prevent negative outcomes from arising.
- Our whole system of public services – public, third and private sectors – must become more efficient by reducing duplication and sharing services wherever possible.

Writing ten years after the publication of the Christie Report, Scotland's Auditor-General, Stephen Boyle, found that "the need for change persists". Audit work conducted by Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission "consistently shows a major implementation gap between policy ambitions and delivery on the ground". In particular, he noted slow progress in the area of joint services:

"I am not convinced that public sector leaders really feel accountable for delivering change that demands different organisations work together. There is much talk of collaborative leadership. But in my discussions with public sector leaders, it's clear that too many of them still don't feel truly empowered or sufficiently emboldened to make the changes they think are needed to deliver Christie".

Alongside the new PSR Strategy, the Scottish Government published [a report describing 15 case studies](#) of preventative interventions introduced in Scotland in the period since devolution. Local authorities play an important part in many of these.

Account Commission's Transformation in Councils report

In its [2024 Transformation in Councils](#) report, the Accounts Commission concluded that "councils cannot deliver transformation alone and it is essential that the Scottish Government and Community Planning and third sector partners support the transformation of local services through more effective collaboration". The section of the report on barriers to reform being particularly relevant to the Committee's scrutiny. These include:

- ring-fenced funding and protected services;
- cost of living hardship for some households – leading to additional pressures;
- workforce pressures including skills gaps, vacancies, absences, etc.;
- public push-back on decisions to reduce services;
- increased service demands, including demographic changes;
- preventative approaches not being prioritised;
- unwillingness or lack of capacity to engage in transformative activity;
- lack of co-ordinated decision-making between public bodies;
- low appetite for risk and fear of failure; and
- increasing costs, for example cost of materials in construction projects.

The report concludes that “some of these barriers are external and not within councils’ control. Others are internal or partially internal, and councils have at least some control over how they overcome or remove those barriers and should do all they can to do so”.

In the Minister for Public Finance’s [statement to the Parliament](#) he highlighted what is needed for reform to take place across the public sector:

“It is key that we join up services and change how we do things to better integrate local services. We need to further develop local partnerships, empower staff and communities, remove duplication and break the cycle of people being passed from pillar to post in order to get help. We will simplify the policy landscape, strengthen community planning partnerships, unlock the potential of the third sector, tackle barriers to data sharing and maximise the use of digital technologies to make services fit for the future. That is exemplified in the whole-family support approach. The Scottish Government is working with local partners to enable greater local decision making and flexibility to support families at risk of poverty. That means that local partners can use resources in the way that they find most effective to support people.”

Accounts Commission’s Best Value audits

The Accounts Commission report also mentions its Best Value reporting in 2024-25 which has focussed on transformation, specifically:

- The extent to which councils have clear plans for transformation that link to their priorities and support long term financial sustainability.
- How councils’ programme management arrangements facilitate effective oversight of their transformation plans.
- The extent to which communities and partners are involved in the development and delivery of councils’ plans for transformation.
- The extent to which councils have considered the impact of their transformation activity, including on vulnerable or protected groups

They conclude that “evidence from our Best Value reporting work shows that transformation activity across Scotland’s 32 councils is varied”.

There are some examples of good practice, for example Dundee City Council which has undertaken a lengthy transformational programme, now integrated in its Council Plan. It has delivered £147 million in savings. The Council has done this by “focusing on large-scale transformative changes including property rationalisation, digital service provision, service re-design, shared services and payments and income generation”.

Other examples of good practice were identified in the Best Value report for East Renfrewshire Council. It has used reduced pension contributions to establish an Investment in the Future reserve:

“The total one-off resource available to the council is estimated at £12.6 million. Clear criteria has been set for the use of the fund, including sustainability, alignment to the overall strategic priorities and projects should support spend to save initiatives or investment and development of the workforce. A further £2 million has been set aside to support the next phase of the council's transformation.”

Likewise, Scottish Borders Council launched its “Fit for 2024” transformation programme in 2019. An evaluation found that the programme had achieved permanent savings of £37 million and met its five aims of reviewing services, enhancing community engagement, making best use of physical assets, investing in digital transformation and improving processes and productivity.

However, the Best Value reports also show that many councils are not pursuing transformation at an adequate pace. Of the 13 [Best Value audits](#) published since February 2024, most reveal some concern/frustration on the part of the Commission at the slow pace of change.

Improvement Service and SOLACE transformation programme

Over the past few years, the Improvement Service and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) have been working on a sector-led [Transformation Programme](#). The Accounts Commission mentions this in its *Transformation* report, noting the Programme is:

“a positive development representing a radical change to how councils work towards transformation. But the work is at an early stage. More clarity is needed on the timescales for achieving outcomes and there are significant risks around workforce capacity and skills to realise ambitions.”

The Committee wrote to the Improvement Service requesting an update on this work, for example how the Programme is progressing the six anchors identified by SOLACE/IS as “key building blocks for transformation”:

- Unlock community action.
- Enable a functioning, trusted local and central government relationship.
- Design for people's needs.
- Create digital, design and technology-enabled transformation.
- Tackle inequality and meet the needs of all citizens.
- Lead council and cross-sector partnerships with a focus on outcomes.

The Programme arose from the [Delivering a future for Scottish Local Authorities](#) report published by the Improvement Service in October 2022 and co-written by

seven local authority chief executives. The Improvement Service [responded](#) to the Committee's letter on 28 August 2025.

The Scottish Government's Invest to Save fund

In January, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government was [asked about public service reform specifically relating to the 2025-26 Budget](#). She emphasised that "it is for local government to decide how it utilises its resources" whilst reiterating the Government and COSLA's joint commitment on the need for reform.

The Cabinet Secretary also highlighted the [Invest to Save Fund](#) announced in the Budget. This is a £30 million fund supporting efforts "to catalyse efficiency, effectiveness and productivity projects" as part of the Government's wider public service reform programme. The Cabinet Secretary told the Committee:

"You will be aware that we have established an invest to save fund and have provided up to £30 million for it. I have not said that local government's share of the fund is £X, but I encourage local government to make proposals. We want proposals that will maximise the return on investment and that represent fundamental game-changing reforms that will make a difference to the way in which local services are provided."

Around £6 million of the £30 million has been allocated to local government and the fund is initially provided on a one-year basis. The "principal", i.e. the original amount allocated to a council, will be returned to the Scottish Government to allow further investment in future years. It therefore operates as "a repayable grant". The funding is only available to support resource improvements and is not to be used for capital projects.

The "principal" will be paid back using the savings made and will create "a cyclical fund for future years". Full savings may not be generated immediately and so recovering the principal immediately may not be achievable. The Scottish Government therefore proposes that "principals" are paid back in instalments from future savings.

An [FOI was submitted](#) to the Scottish Government on 12 May requesting information on applications made to the Invest to Save fund. The Government's response contained a list of organisations who have submitted bids, including the following:

- Aberdeen City Council
- Clackmannanshire and Falkirk Council
- Clackmannanshire Council
- Combined Councils bid
- Dumfries and Galloway Council
- Glasgow City Council
- Perth & Kinross Council (6)

Details of proposals were included in a further FOI answered by the SG in August: [Invest to Save Fund proposals: FOI release - gov.scot](#).

The May FOI response stresses that the final decision on successful bids has not yet been agreed: “this information will be published when this decision has been made”. An assessment board with a mix of Government and other public sector members have now assessed the bids.

On the 9 July, the Leader of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar [announced that the Council](#) had been awarded £300,000 from the Invest to Save Fund. This will “allow the Comhairle to take forward its work on the Single Authority Model (SAM), to develop working models as to how a SAM would work and to engage on the detail of these models with our Community Planning partners and the wider public”.

Consultation on a general power of competence

Local authorities in Scotland can only do those things which statute empowers them to do. Anything else could be considered ultra vires (i.e. beyond their powers). This is in contrast to the general power of competence (GPC) enjoyed by local authorities in other parts of the UK. After representations from COSLA and individual councils, [the Scottish Government launched a consultation](#) on a general power of competence (GPC) in January 2025.

An [analysis of consultation responses](#) was published in June with Scottish Government officials concluding that “the consultation elicited a wide range of views and did not ultimately deliver a definitive preference for the next steps”. Those in favour of a GPC, mostly local authorities and some professional stakeholder, argue that the:

“...adherence to the ultra vires principle, that councils may do only what they are specifically permitted to do in law, was frequently highlighted as a barrier to innovation.”

In its submission to the Scottish Government consultation, the [Local Government Information Unit](#) states that legislative restrictions on councils may act as “an obstacle to councils’ ability to deliver innovative services, work across boundaries, deal with inequality, support local communities, address market failure or drive inclusive growth or generate income”.

The [Highland Council in its submission](#) acknowledges that “councils need to transform” and this would be “greatly assisted if permissive and consolidated legislation was enacted to encourage and support potential solutions to the severe challenges to our sustainability”.

The [Accounts Commission’s submission](#) highlights its recent call for local government and Scottish Government to “make significant progress in agreeing a future operating model for councils” They accept that a GPC could be regarded as “an enabler of transformation at the pace and scale now required but its introduction would be a policy decision” [the Commission does not take positions on SG policy decisions]. However, the Commission also notes that there is “no audit evidence to suggest that a GPC would have enabled faster and deeper transformation”.

Greig Liddell, SPICe Research
3 September 2025

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