

Programme for Government 2026-2031

Scottish Government

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Scotland.
For information only: England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

1 Executive summary

The Scottish Government has published its Programme for Government 2026-2031, setting out its priorities and planned actions for the five-year parliamentary term. The Programme focuses on four overarching priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency, and delivering a stronger NHS and public services. It will be updated annually alongside the Scottish Budget.

For local government, one of the most significant elements of the Programme is the proposed reform of Scotland's public services and local governance. The Scottish Government has committed to three months of intensive engagement with local government and other partners on the future structure of local government, with the aim of reaching a shared direction by the end of 2026. The Scottish Government is seeking stronger strategic regions alongside empowered local communities, while stating that reform should not create another layer of administration or a new group of politicians.

The Programme also contains a wide range of commitments directly relevant to council services, including community wealth building and public procurement, housing and homelessness prevention, school meals, transport and infrastructure, climate adaptation, waste and recycling, digital transformation and the use of artificial intelligence. The proposed public sector reform is significant, with plans to simplify structures, reduce duplication, consolidate public bodies and move towards more integrated and people-focused services. The scale of these ambitions will have to be considered alongside the financial and operational pressures facing local authorities and the wider public sector.

[Click here](#) for further information and to read the full programme.

2 Overview

The Programme for Government sets out the Scottish Government's priorities for the new parliamentary term to 2031. The Programme is structured around four overarching priorities:

- Eradicating child poverty: continuing to tackle poverty and inequality, supporting families with the cost of living, improving access to housing and childcare, and preventing homelessness.
- Growing the economy: supporting businesses, investment and employment across Scotland, strengthening regional economies and using public procurement to support local supply chains and communities.
- Tackling the climate emergency: progressing Scotland's transition to net zero while strengthening resilience to flooding, coastal change, wildfires and other climate impacts.
- Delivering a stronger NHS and public services: reforming public services, improving productivity and prevention, making greater use of technology and data, and changing how services are organised around the needs of people and communities.

Although these priorities cover a wide range of policy areas, there are several areas of particular relevance to Scottish local government, particularly the proposed programme of public service reform and the future structure of local government.

2.1 Reforming local government and public services

The Scottish Government has stated that it wants to "rewire the Scottish state", with public services designed around the needs of citizens rather than existing organisational structures. This includes greater collaboration between organisations, more decision-making at the appropriate local or regional level, stronger community empowerment, increased use of technology and a greater focus on prevention.

The Scottish Government has begun a three month period of engagement with local government and other partners on the future structure of local government. It argues that some councils are currently too small to operate strategically, while others are too large to remain sufficiently local. The proposed direction is towards stronger and more strategic regions, while ensuring that localities within those regions have sufficient powers and resources to make genuinely local decisions. The Scottish Government has also stated that reform should not create another administrative tier or another group of politicians. Island communities are to be given particular consideration, including continued exploration of the [Single Authority Model](#) where it is wanted. The Programme also highlights existing examples of councils working collaboratively to deliver integrated services, including work involving Falkirk, Clackmannanshire and Stirling Councils and the Ayrshire Councils.

Social care reform will also form part of the three-month engagement process. The Scottish Government argues that current arrangements can create competing lines of accountability and that decisions made in social care can have significant consequences for NHS services, including

delayed discharge. It is seeking reforms that make better use of funding, improve efficiency and achieve economies of scale while continuing to meet local needs.

The wider reform programme extends beyond local government. The Scottish Government plans to replace Scotland's 14 territorial NHS Health Boards with two Strategic Health Boards and substantially reduce the number of public bodies. Proposed changes include bringing Transport Scotland into core Government, creating a single overarching national environmental body from organisations including SEPA, NatureScot and Zero Waste Scotland, and exploring further opportunities for joint working and mergers.

The Scottish Government also intends to simplify public service delivery through a "tell us once" approach, shared data and digital platforms, consolidated functions such as estates and procurement, and the development of the [ScotGov App](#). The Programme also highlights greater use of automation and data sharing, alongside work to accelerate the safe adoption of artificial intelligence.

2.2 Prevention, poverty and communities

Prevention is another central theme, with the Scottish Government proposing a Scottish Prevention Investment Framework to provide a more consistent approach to identifying, assessing and prioritising investment in prevention and early intervention. The intention is to shift resources towards interventions that improve outcomes and reduce future demand on public services.

The Programme contains a number of commitments that will have implications for councils and communities. The [Scottish Child Payment](#) is forecast to keep over 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2026/27, while the Scottish Government will continue expanding childcare and free school meal provision. Up to £2.8 million will also be provided to local authorities to help write off school meal debt.

Housing and homelessness are also prominent. The Scottish Government intends to prioritise homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing, backed by a £50 million [Homelessness Prevention Fund](#) over ten years. It will also support local authorities in delivering 1,500 [Housing First tenancies](#) over five years and continue investment in affordable housing through [More Homes Scotland](#).

Community empowerment and community wealth building are intended to sit at the heart of the proposed new approach to governance. The Scottish Government wants communities to have greater influence over local decision-making and greater opportunities to develop community assets and services.

2.3 Economic growth, procurement and regeneration

The Programme places considerable emphasis on achieving economic growth across all parts of Scotland. The Scottish Government has invested more than £1.9 billion through [Scottish City and Regional Growth Deals](#) and intends to give Regional Economic Partnerships a stronger role in driving regional growth.

Community wealth building is identified as an important mechanism for ensuring that economic activity benefits local communities. This includes using public sector procurement and collective budgets to strengthen local supply chains and create employment. The Scottish Government will also take forward the [Community Wealth Building \(Scotland\) Act 2026](#) and consult on a Procurement Bill aimed at modernising procurement and increasing its economic and social impact.

This will be particularly relevant to councils given the scale of their spending and procurement activity. The Programme also identifies regeneration, town centres, social enterprises, community ownership and vacant and derelict land as areas where public investment can contribute to local economic development.

Transport and connectivity are also linked to the Scottish Government's growth agenda. Commitments include improving mobile and broadband coverage, progressing the [Clyde Metro](#), addressing potholes, improving rural road links and supporting better local bus and public services. The Scottish Government also intends to take forward Better Buses legislation during the Parliament.

2.4 Climate, infrastructure and environmental services

The Scottish Government remains committed to achieving net zero by 2045 while increasing resilience to the impacts of climate change. The Programme recognises that flooding, wildfires, coastal change and water scarcity are already affecting communities and infrastructure.

For local authorities, the Programme includes an additional £15 million for flood mitigation and prevention and a further £14 million Coastal Change Adaptation Fund over the course of the Parliament. The latter will support councils with coastal adaptation plans and action to address coastal erosion and rising sea levels.

The Scottish Government also intends to establish a statutory code of practice for household waste recycling, paired with a [Deposit Return Scheme](#) operating alongside equivalent systems elsewhere in the UK. Other commitments include making it easier to install public electric vehicle chargers, encouraging investment in heavy-duty vehicle decarbonisation and introducing a Heat in Buildings Bill.

The Programme therefore places councils at the centre of a range of climate and environmental priorities, particularly through their responsibilities for waste, transport, roads, planning, housing, flood management, green spaces and local resilience.

2.5 Digital transformation and technology

Digital transformation is presented as an important tool for reforming public services rather than an end in itself. The Scottish Government wants services to be easier to access and better connected, including through a "tell us once" approach, shared data standards and the planned ScotGov App.

The Programme also highlights the potential for automation and artificial intelligence to improve

productivity and service delivery. The Scottish Government will continue work through its AI Scotland programme and develop approaches to support the safe adoption of AI across public services, including healthcare.

For councils, this creates opportunities to consider how digital tools, shared data and automation could support service redesign, but also raises practical questions around interoperability, information governance, workforce skills, digital exclusion and investment in existing IT infrastructure.

3 Year one legislative programme

The Scottish Government has announced nine Bills for 2026/27. These include:

- Budget Bill
- Buildings (Heating and Energy Performance) and Heat Networks (Scotland) Bill
- Council Tax (Scotland) Bill
- Damages (Scotland) Bill
- Food Prices (Scotland) Bill
- Football Banning Orders (Scotland) Bill
- Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill
- Misogyny (Criminal Law) (Scotland) Bill
- Public Service Renewal (Scotland) Bill

The Council Tax (Scotland) Bill is of particular relevance to local government, as it will introduce new council tax bands for high-value residential properties by 1 April 2028 and provide opportunities to modernise aspects of the council tax framework and increase local flexibility through discretionary powers. The Public Service Renewal (Scotland) Bill will provide the initial legislative framework for wider public service reform.

4 APSE comment

The Programme for Government sets out an ambitious agenda for the next five years, with significant implications for Scotland's local authorities. While many of the commitments relate to national policy, their successful delivery will depend heavily on the capacity of councils and other local partners to implement change on the ground. APSE welcomes the Scottish Government's recognition that public services need to be able to focus more on prevention, collaboration, community empowerment and the needs of residents, rather than being constrained by existing organisational structures.

The proposed reform of local government is likely to be one of the most significant developments arising from the Programme. The commitment to three months of intensive engagement with local government provides an important opportunity for councils to shape the future relationship

between national, regional and local government. APSE supports the principle of stronger local decision-making and more empowered communities, but any changes to the structure of local government must be based on a clear understanding of the services councils actually deliver and the different circumstances of Scotland's communities. Reform should not simply be about changing organisational boundaries or achieving economies of scale; it should improve outcomes for residents and strengthen the ability of councils to respond to local priorities. APSE would therefore welcome the opportunity to be involved in these discussions in order to strengthen the voice for our Scottish member authorities alongside other organisations including COSLA.

The Programme's wider emphasis on public service reform also raises important questions about capacity, workforce and resources. Councils are already responsible for delivering many of the services through which the Scottish Government's priorities will be achieved, from tackling poverty and homelessness to housing, education, transport, waste, environmental services and community development. Structural or technological change therefore needs to be accompanied by realistic considerations of workforce capacity, skills, financial pressures, assets and infrastructure. Local government reform should strengthen frontline delivery rather than creating additional complexity for the services and staff expected to implement it.

There are also significant opportunities within the Programme for councils to contribute to the wider economic, social and environmental objectives. The focus on community wealth building and public procurement recognises the considerable influence that local government spending can have on local economies. With member authorities including North Ayrshire Council already undertaking excellent work within this area to ensure community wealth building is at the fore (see [North Ayrshire presentation July 2022](#)). Commitments on housing, regeneration and homelessness prevention reinforce the central role of councils in supporting resilient communities. Similarly, the commitments on climate adaptation, flood prevention, waste and recycling, transport and digital transformation all intersect directly with existing local authority responsibilities. APSE Energy's Scotland energy summit will look at some of these areas, for more information on the event and how to attend please [click here](#). The successful delivery of these ambitions will require effective partnership working and sufficient support for councils to translate national commitments into practical local action.

The coming months will therefore be important for local government, particularly as the Scottish Government develops its proposals for the future structure and delivery of services. Councils should take the opportunity to contribute their experience and perspectives to the engagement process, ensuring that any reform is grounded in the realities of frontline service delivery and the needs of local communities. For APSE members, this is also an opportunity to demonstrate the value of effective, locally delivered public services and the contribution councils can make to the Programme's wider ambitions.

5 How can APSE help?

All APSE members can access the APSE Scotland network, which provides updates, information, and opportunities to engage with colleagues across local government in Scotland. Members can keep

up to date with regional activities, events, policy developments, and networking opportunities by visiting the Scotland members' area. You can access the network using this link: [APSE Scotland](#)

David Hinds,
Research and Information Officer
dhinds@apse.org.uk

Louise Melville,
Policy Lead (Scotland)
lmelville@apse.org.uk

Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all in-person networks end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area, please email enquiries@apse.org.uk

Our national networks include:-

- FM and Building Cleaning
- Catering (School Meals)
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
- Local Government Reorganisation Network
- Waste Management, Recycling and Street Cleansing

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Association for Public Service Excellence
3rd floor,
Trafford House,
Chester Road, Manchester M32 0RS.
telephone: 0161 772 1810
web: www.apse.org.uk

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