

## Purpose

1. This report provides an update on significant recent activity relating to local government. Much of its content is derived from weekly digests of media and Parliamentary mentions, Parliamentary committee updates, consultations and other relevant news updates, which are provided to members by Audit Scotland's Communications Team and are available through the [members' SharePoint site](#).

## Recommendations

2. The Commission is invited to:
  - Note this report and consider any implications for its work programme
  - Agree the recommendations regarding responding to consultations.

## Recent publications and engagement

3. Below are details of the media coverage, download statistics and social media engagement for reports issued recently by the Commission.
  - **[Best Value in Orkney Islands Council](#)** (30 January 2024)
    - Media coverage: [STV News](#), [The Herald](#), [The National](#), [The Scotsman](#) (online); Daily Record, The Herald, The i, Press and Journal, The Scotsman (print).
    - Engagement statistics (up to 21 February): 265 report downloads; 2,750 views, 1,000 video views and 110 engagements on social media; 4% engagement rate.
4. Quarterly and annual download statistics for Commission publications are also provided, to supplement the regular monthly statistics. The next quarterly update, covering the period up to the end of March 2024, will be provided in the May edition of this report.

## Media and Parliamentary monitoring

5. The Commission has been cited by the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance (DFM), Shona Robison MSP, on two occasions so far during debates regarding the Scottish Budget. During the Stage 1 debate on 8 February (as well as in the debate on Pre-Budget Scrutiny reports the previous week), the DFM referred to a statistic in the Local Government Overview 2023 report about the trend in revenue funding, stating:

*"We all rely on local authorities for vital public services, and the budget provides a record £14 billion for local government, including £144 million to fund the council tax freeze, which is a 6 per cent increase on the current year. As the Accounts Commission has confirmed, our local government revenue funding is now 2.6 per cent higher in real terms than in 2013-14."*

## Scottish Budget

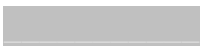


### Overview

6. The Budget Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament following the Stage 3 debate on 27 February. It had earlier been passed at Stage 1 on 8 February and proceeded through Stage 2 consideration by the Finance and Public Administration Committee on 20 February. The Local Government Finance Order was agreed on 28 February.

### Local Government

7. On 22 February, the DFM announced that – subject to the UK Spring Budget delivering an improved funding position as expected – the Scottish Government will provide an additional £62.7 million of funding to councils *if they agree to freeze Council Tax*. This sum consists of:
- £45 million in expected in Barnett consequentials arising from the additional extra funding for social care in England that had already been announced
  - A further £17.7 million from the Scottish Government
8. This additional funding is designed to meet the gap in the Local Government Settlement identified by COSLA in its [Budget Reality](#) document. Therefore, according to the Scottish Government, the money offered to councils to cover the Council Tax freeze is now “wholly additional funding”. However, COSLA has said that tying this funding to the council tax freeze rather than providing it to all councils as part of the Settlement is “not appropriate”.
9. The DFM had earlier [written to COSLA and Council Leaders](#) to advise them of the allocation each council would receive if it agreed to freeze Council Tax, and stated explicitly that any council that did not freeze Council Tax would not receive any of the earmarked funding.
10. Under the proposed methodology, each council would be set to receive whichever is higher of the following options:
- a share equivalent to what they would expect to obtain from a 5% rise locally – net of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme;
  - a distribution by council based on their share of gross national revenue
- For 23 councils, the former option is the most advantageous. The total sum thus allocated is now £147.2 million.
11. As of Tuesday 27 February, only one council – Argyll & Bute – had decided to reject the freeze, opting instead to increase Council Tax by 10%. The additional funding was only announced on the day that Argyll & Bute set its budget, and it’s now thought that the council may be worse off, even with the 10% increase, than if it had frozen Council Tax.
12. Others including Aberdeenshire, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North and South Lanarkshire, and Scottish Borders, had all agreed to freeze Council Tax. However, most had still to agree their budgets, with many set to do so on 29 February.
13. Meanwhile, [COSLA has declared a “fundamental position of dispute”](#) with the Scottish Government over a range of issues including the Council Tax freeze and teacher numbers. One council leader described the Verity House Agreement as “dead in the water” due to the deteriorating nature of relations between the two parties.

## Analysis

- 14.** The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) published its [detailed briefing on the Local Government Settlement](#). The briefing's summary included the following points:
- The Budget document shows that the local government revenue settlement increases by 5% in real terms when comparing the 2024/25 Budget to the 2023/24 Budget. Local authority directors of finance believe that this is not an accurate representation of changes to local authorities' spending power.
  - COSLA argues that the cost of previously agreed national commitments means that the local government revenue settlement is £62.7 million less than they expected, even before inflation is factored in.
  - All local authorities see a real terms increase in their revenue funding when comparing the provisional 2024/25 figures with provisional 2023/24 allocations. Island authorities receive a far higher per head allocation than mainland local authorities; Edinburgh and Aberdeen receive the lowest per-head allocations.
  - There is a significant reduction in capital funding between 2023/24 and 2024/25.
  - There is continued debate over the principle of the Scottish Government announcing a council tax freeze without consulting local government, and the estimated cost of "fully funding" such a freeze.
- 15.** The briefing included the following figures for local government revenue funding:
- A cash increase of 6.8% – 5% in real terms – *compared to the 2023/24 Budget* (rising from £12.4 billion to £13.25 billion in cash terms).
  - A cash increase of 3% - 2% in real terms – *compared to the latest available figures for 2023-24 outturn*.
  - Local government's share of the Scottish Government revenue budget is 33.1% - up from 31.7% in the 2023/24 Budget, and back to the level seen in 2013-14.
- 16.** The figures in the briefing also show a significant shift from specific ('ring-fenced') grants to core funding. Overall, SPICe indicates the following trend in the proportion of the total revenue settlement that is made up of ring-fenced or transferred funding:
- 2020-21 & 21-22:  11%
  - 2022-23 & 23-24:  18%
  - 2024-25 Budget:  13%
- 17.** On capital funding, SPICe figures show a significant reduction in both cash terms (23%) and real terms (24%) compared to the 2023/24 Budget. Most of this is accounted for by the switch into the General Revenue Grant (GRG) of £120.6 million of funding for pay deals, which was previously provided as capital and then transferred to revenue (conversely, this explains some of the increase in revenue funding).
- 18.** Meanwhile, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) said on 6 February that [the Scottish Budget gives a "misleading impression"](#) about spending increases. Taking the example of health, the IFS pointed out that while the budget documentation shows a 1.3% real-terms year-on-year increase, funding is set to fall by 0.7% in real terms when in-year top-ups are included.

19. While the Scottish Government says it is obliged to present like-for-like comparisons with the previous year's Budget, the Committee itself has recommended that the Scottish Government follows the lead of the UK Government and the Scottish Fiscal Commission in comparing Budget plans for spending with the latest estimates or outturns from the previous year. This detail has now been published as a [supporting document for the Budget](#), showing initial allocations and in-year changes for Level 3 budget lines in each of the last two years.

## Other local government finance issues

20. 'Our Scottish Future', a think-tank set up by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, has [recommended a new system of local taxation in Scotland](#), and called for "efforts to build a cross-party consensus" before the 2026 Scottish election. The report recommends that councils are given the power to join together to form Scottish Combined Authorities, and are given greater financial discretion, with more multi-year budgets and a reduction in ring-fencing. The report says Scotland is one of the most centralised nations in Europe, and says the 'command and control' culture exemplified by the Council Tax freeze must end.
21. The Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) has published a new [comparative analysis of council tax systems](#) in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, as part of a series of briefings on council tax reform that started with [an overview of the issues](#). (*Commission members can now access LGIU's member-only content by logging in or setting up an account using their Commission email address.*) Key messages from the latest briefing include a need to expand council tax reform beyond revaluation, to ensure that any reforms future-proof the system, and to increase councils' autonomy including by enabling multi-year rate-setting.
22. The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC) Committee of the House of Commons published [a report on its inquiry into "Financial distress in local authorities"](#). The report says "local authorities are now issuing section 114 notices at an alarming rate which puts them and local taxpayers at risk" and called for Government action to help local authorities "survive the severe crisis and financial distress that they face". The Committee said whoever wins the next election "must embark on a fundamental review of the systems of local authority funding, local taxation, and delivery of social care services".
23. Other key points in the LUHC Committee's report included:
- The financial crisis in local government comes after significant reductions in councils' spending power, which has coincided with increasing demand and high inflation; local authorities face a funding gap estimated at £4 billion over the next two years.
  - Local authorities are increasingly reliant on income from council tax to fund services – but council tax is regressive, long overdue for reform and leading to a disproportionately negative impact on funding levels of authorities in the most deprived areas.
  - Children's and adults' social care, services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and rising levels of homelessness, are all frequently cited as key pressures on local authorities' finances
24. Birmingham City Council announced [details of cuts to services](#) it is planning to make in order to save £300 million over the next two years, including: a £52 million reduction in the budget for children and families services; £24 million cut from the adult social care budget; £39 million saved in city operations including waste; and a £6 million cut to the city housing budget – all in 2024/25 alone. The council also plans to increase council tax by 10% in

2024/25, and a further 10% in 2025/26 (using special dispensation from the Government to exceed the normal 5% cap), and as previously reported, up to 600 jobs are likely to be lost.

25. The IFS produced a [podcast titled 'Are Councils in Crisis?'](#) looking at how so many councils – in England, particularly – ended up in financial difficulty and what can be done about it. The podcast features the IFS's Director, Paul Johnson, its Head of Local Government Finance, David Phillips, and Tony Travers, professor at the London School of Economics.
26. The Guardian produced a series of articles at the end of January on the theme of "[Councils in crisis](#)", supplemented by occasional stories since then. Features included an [analysis of funding cuts](#) (including some Institute for Government data) to various council services in England, and a warning about the likely [maximum council tax increase](#) south of the border.
27. The Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee (SLARC) published its final report on its [independent review of councillor remuneration](#). Reconvened in April 2023 after a gap of 12 years since its last report, SLARC engaged extensively with Scottish councils to gain insights into the role of modern-day councillors and how this has changed over the past decade. SLARC also considered how key population groups may be excluded from public office and what steps can be taken to address this.
28. The SLARC report includes a total of [22 recommendations](#) relating to councillors' remuneration and expenses, based on its [findings](#) which include the following:
  - The demographic make-up of councillors does not match the general population, with women, young people and people with disabilities particularly under-represented.
  - Most councillors spend at least 26 hours per week on formal council duties, while more than 40% consider the role to be full-time; at the same time, nearly 40% of councillors spend 26-40 hours per week on other employment, education or caring duties.
  - Social media creates more casework for two thirds of councillors; almost three quarters say their involvement in partnerships and committees is increasingly demanding.
  - The role of councillors – in particular the scale of responsibility for key public services and community wellbeing – is not always well understood by members of other public bodies, and often proves much more demanding than new members expected.
  - Remuneration levels are not considered to reflect the complexity of the role, and can be a significant barrier to potential candidates and serving councillors.
29. Dumfries and Galloway Council received confirmation that [it will not receive government support](#) – from either the UK or Scottish Governments – for the £7.6 million cost of removing potentially dangerous reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) from schools and a swimming pool. Councillors raised concerns about the financial strain, with fears that the bill might increase. The council already faces a bill of £920,000 for initial remedial works.
30. A new [Addressing Depopulation Fund](#) will provide £180,000 to help three councils facing acute population decline to trial ways of attracting and retaining people in their communities. Part-funding has been provided by the Scottish Government for the current and next financial years for Community Settlement Officers in Argyll & Bute, Highland and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, while Dumfries and Galloway Council will receive £30,000 to research the causes of local population decline, to inform the development of future policy interventions. Other projects set to receive funds will be announced later this year.

## Policy area updates

### National Care Service

31. The Health, Social Care and Sport Committee published its [Stage 1 report on the National Care Service \(Scotland\) Bill](#) on 22 February. Most members of the Committee have given qualified backing to the principles of the Bill (SNP and Green members voted in favour, Conservative and Labour voted against), but [warned that their support is conditional](#) on the Government addressing the issues highlighted in the report and agreeing to facilitate further scrutiny of the Bill ahead of formal Stage 2 proceedings.
32. A lack of detail on how the proposed National Care Service would operate was highlighted as a particular concern, along with a lack of clarity on the scope and purpose of the co-design process. The Committee has asked to see a full list of amendments the Scottish Government intends to bring forward at Stage 2 to reflect the revised approach agreed with local government and the NHS, and for additional time to take further evidence based on those amendments. The timescale for this expanded Stage 2 process is not yet clear.
33. Meanwhile, the Finance and Public Administration Committee [wrote to the Minister, Maree Todd MSP](#), setting out its continuing concerns about the finances for the Bill and requesting a range of information as promised by Scottish Government officials in recent evidence sessions (which [the Minister later provided](#)). The Committee concluded that it is still “not confident” the new figures provided are “an accurate reflection of the final costs of the Bill”.
34. The Stage 1 debate took place on 29 February – after this report was issued to Commission members; an update will be provided if there are any significant issues to report.

### Health and social care

35. The Scottish Government has announced its intention to retain the legislation that provides for a minimum unit price of alcohol beyond 30 April 2024, and to [increase the minimum unit price](#) from 50p per unit to 65p per unit from 30 September 2024, in order to counteract the effects of inflation. Public Health Scotland has said that while alcohol-related deaths have risen 25% in the last three years, minimum unit pricing has meant that deaths that are wholly attributable to alcohol are 13.5% lower than would otherwise have been expected. Meanwhile, public attitudes research in 2023 found a narrow majority in favour of the policy.
36. The latest [monthly figures from Public Health Scotland](#) show that the number of cases of delayed discharge – where patients remain in hospital after they are fit to be discharged, due to delays in the availability of care packages – fell by 5% in December, from 1,900 to 1,800. The average length of delays, however, rose from 22 days to 29 days.

### Housing and homelessness

37. The latest [annual housing statistics](#) have been released. New housing supply increased by 10% in 2022/23 – 24,400 new homes were made available (of which 98% were new builds), which compares to 22,200 in 2021/22 and is the highest level since the 2007/08 financial crisis. Private sector and social housing sector new build completions increased by 12% and 6% respectively, while local authorities saw a fall of 28% (750 homes) in completions. However, [figures reported elsewhere](#) indicate that the number of new build homes being started is down by 26% and the number of completions has fallen by 6%.

- 38.** Meanwhile the latest [quarterly homelessness statistics](#) show that in April to September 2023, 16,500 households were assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness – 4% more than the same period in 2022– while 15,600 households and nearly 10,000 children were in temporary accommodation at 30 September 2023, both up 8% in a year. There were just over 20,000 applications for homelessness assistance in the 6-month period – an increase of 3% compared to a year earlier – with 30,000 open cases at 30 September 2023, 10% higher than in 2022 and the highest level on record.
- 39.** [In Glasgow](#), the number of people in temporary accommodation rose by 25% between November 2023 and January 2024, exceeding 7,000 people including 3,500 children. There was also a jump in those reporting rough sleeping, and a 34% increase in the number of people housed in hotels and B&Bs, during the same period.
- 40.** A public opinion survey commissioned by advisory firm True North has found that [74% of people in Scotland agree the country is in a housing crisis](#), with 55% believing too few homes are being built. Meanwhile, [more than 10,000 people signed an open letter](#) produced by Shelter Scotland demanding that the First Minister declare a housing emergency and deliver an action plan to end it. The letter argues that reducing social housing budgets would be detrimental to poverty reduction efforts, stating that safe, warm and affordable housing is a basic human right. The survey and the letter come after the announcement in the Scottish Budget of a £200 million cut to the Affordable Housing Supply Programme.
- 41.** The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) published a [blog on affordable housing](#) in January, assessing the proposed budget cut as well as progress towards the Scottish Government’s housing targets.

## Poverty and inequality

- 42.** The Scottish Government is providing Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) with £200,000 funding as part of a new [pilot scheme to help tackle council tax debt](#). The pilot aims to better understand the reasons why some people end up in council tax arrears, and to help reduce and prevent future council tax debt. The pilot – in Clackmannanshire, Renfrewshire and the Scottish Borders – will involve testing different ways of working including providing targeted support to people facing council tax debt, simplifying referral processes between councils and advisory services, and organising mutual training sessions for council and CAS staff.
- 43.** The pilot comes as council figures show significant increases in council tax debt in recent years. For example, the [total outstanding council tax debt in Moray is £17.5m](#) while [the Highland Council area has a total of £39 million](#) of council tax debt – both about a third of the expected income for the current financial year. To put those figures in context, Moray’s newest primary school cost £11.5 million to build and its newest secondary school cost £42 million. The largest single debt in Moray is £31,500 – equivalent to the total council tax paid on a band D property in the last 22 years – and one household in the Highlands has a debt of £48,800, which equates to 28 years of Band C payments.

## Climate change

- 44.** On 31 January the Scottish Government published four reports as part of its Environment Strategy for Scotland, on the evidence base, policy levers and international best practice for ensuring Scotland’s [international environmental impact is sustainable](#), ensuring Scotland has a [sustainable global footprint](#), supporting the necessary [transformations in Scotland’s economy to tackle the climate emergency](#), and [transitioning to a nature positive economy](#).

45. The Scottish Housing Regulator (SHR) has warned that [the social housing sector faces a bill of up to £9 billion](#) to meet the Scottish Government's net zero standards, with "difficult choices" needing to be made between funding new social housing and investing in existing properties. The SHR said there is a "lot of uncertainty for landlords" around the Scottish Government's consultation on its proposed net zero standard, and that improvements will ultimately have to be funded either through public subsidy or by rent paid by tenants.

## Education

46. The number of young people in work, training or further study three months after the end of the school year has reached a record high of 95.9% - up from 95.7% in 2021/22 – according to new figures. The 2022/23 [Attainment and Initial Leaver Destination statistics](#) also show that the gap between those from the most and least deprived areas progressing after leaving school has continued to narrow and is now at a record low of 3.7 percentage points.
47. The proportion of school leavers with one or more technical or vocational qualifications at SCQF Level 5 or better has reached a record high of 30.4%. However, the proportions of pupils who left school having attained one pass or more at each of the SCQF Levels all fell compared to 2021/22 – partly due to the return to pre-pandemic measurement, but some of these measures are at their lowest for a decade. 2022/23 also saw higher proportions of S4 and S5 leavers and fewer S6 leavers than in recent years.
48. Council leaders have warned that maintaining teacher numbers at "arbitrary levels" set by the Scottish Government will not be sustainable at current funding levels, with a £145.5m funding allocation for that purpose for next year set to only cover a "very small proportion" of the wage bill. A [COSLA briefing for MSPs](#) says this ring-fencing "will force even deeper cuts on services like social work support, early intervention services, cultural services, youth work and libraries, all of which are vital to supporting children and young people".
49. It's reported that [Glasgow City Council is considering cutting around 450 teaching posts](#) over three years as part of a plan to save £27.8 million. Unions say the move will negatively impact all children and may lead to more exclusions. The council says the education budget amounts to more than half of service expenditure directed by the council, and continuing to protect it is significantly more challenging when substantial savings are still needed.
50. Similarly, [Dundee City Council is set to cut 32 full-time teacher posts](#), affecting both primary and secondary schools, in an effort to save nearly £2 million in the next financial year. The new total number of teachers would still be above that required by the Scottish Government. An impact assessment included in budget papers states the proposed cuts will have a negative impact on pupils and employment opportunities.

## Scottish Parliamentary committees

### Local Government, Housing and Planning (LGHP) Committee

51. The [LGHP Committee](#) took evidence on or considered the Housing (Cladding Remediation) (Scotland) Bill, and the Scottish Government's 'Housing to 2040' strategy.
52. On 30 January, the Committee Convener, Ariane Burgess MSP, wrote [to Joe FitzPatrick MSP](#) (Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning) and [to Cllr Katie Hagmann](#) (COSLA Resources spokesperson) requesting further information and reflections on various Budget-related issues following their earlier evidence session, including:



- Different interpretations and presentations of the budget figures
- Differing understanding of what is and isn't ring-fenced or directed funding
- Prospects for multi-year budgets and greater flexibility to adopt preventative approaches
- The long-term impact of the council tax freeze

**53.** Ms Burgess called on Mr FitzPatrick to invite his officials to discuss with Parliament officials how figures could be presented for future budgets to enable more effective scrutiny. She also asked him to explain the decision-making process that led to the “incontestable” cut in the capital budget for local government, and its potential impact on assets and investment. Responses were due by 20 February but had not been published by 27 February.

**54.** The Committee also received a [letter from Paul McLennan MSP](#) providing an update on the implementation and monitoring of short-term let licensing.

### Public Audit Committee

**55.** The [Public Audit Committee](#) took evidence on:

- The 2022/23 audit of the Scottish Prison Service
- The 2022/23 audit of the Water Industry Commission for Scotland
- Administration of Scottish income tax 2022/23

**56.** The Committee also considered a draft report on its scrutiny of Adult mental health.

### Finance and Public Administration (FPA) Committee

**57.** The [FPA Committee](#) published its [Budget Scrutiny 2024-25 report](#) on 31 January, then hosted a debate on 1 February in which Conveners of all Committees summarised their own Committee's pre-budget scrutiny.

**58.** In its report, the FPA Committee: reiterated its scepticism about the degree to which the Scottish Government has prioritised its spending “in a strategic, coherent and co-ordinated way” in accordance with its three ‘missions’ of equality, opportunity and community; concluded that the Government “remains focused on plugging short-term funding gaps at the expense of medium- and longer-term financial planning”; and was highly critical of the absence of multi-year spending plans and other strategic documents, accusing the Government of “procrastinating on important decision-making”.

**59.** The Committee took evidence from the DFM on the Scottish Government's response to the Budget Scrutiny report on 20 February, having also received a [detailed written response](#). This was followed by the Committee's consideration of the Budget Bill at Stage 2.

### Education, Children and Young People (ECYP) Committee

**60.** The [ECYP Committee](#) is holding a panel discussion on 13 March as part of its inquiry into additional support for learning (ASL). Audit Scotland has been invited, in light of the audit interest and ongoing scoping work on this topic, and Antony Clark has agreed to participate. Antony won't be in a position to share any findings from the ongoing work on ASL at this early stage, but the committee clerk has been made aware of this and is happy for Antony to draw on our wider audit intelligence and evidence.

## Other Committees

61. Meanwhile, the following have been the subject of evidence-taking by Committees (links to any specific evidence sessions are available on request):

- [Abortion Services \(Safe Access Zones\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 1
- Additional Support for Learning
- [Agriculture and Rural Communities \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 1
- [Alcohol \(Minimum Pricing\) \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#) – post-legislative scrutiny
- [Children \(Care and Justice\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 2
- [Community Care \(Personal Care and Nursing Care\) \(Scotland\) Amendment Regulations 2024](#)
- [Consumer Scotland Act 2020 \(Relevant Public Authorities\) Regulations 2024](#)
- [Dangerous Dogs \(Designated Types\) \(Scotland\) Order 2024](#)
- [Gender Representation on Public Boards \(Amendment\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 1
- Homelessness and temporary accommodation
- National Outcomes – *Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee evidence session with Pete Wishart MP, Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee*
- [Procurement Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) – post-legislative scrutiny
- [Social Care \(Self-directed Support\) \(Scotland\) Act 2013](#) – post-legislative scrutiny
- Social Security Scotland
- [Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 1
- [Wildlife Management and Muirburn \(Scotland\) Bill](#) – Stage 2

## Ministerial changes

62. Michael Matheson resigned as Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, replaced by Neil Gray, who was previously Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy. The Wellbeing Economy portfolio was transferred to Mairi McAllan, who is also responsible for Net Zero and Energy, while Fiona Hyslop became Cabinet Secretary for Transport (which was previously part of Ms McAllan’s responsibilities).

63. Elena Whitham stood down as Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, replaced by Christina McKelvie. Kaukab Stewart replaced Ms McKelvie as Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. Meanwhile, Jim Fairlie also joined the government as a new Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity.

## COSLA and Improvement Service updates

64. The Improvement Service published the latest [annual report of the Common Advice Performance Management Reporting Framework](#) which measures key indicators of performance for money and welfare rights advice services. Local authority-funded money and welfare rights advice services reported securing £330.5 million of verified financial gain for clients in 2022/23, an increase of 20% from the previous year. The report’s findings highlight the important role these services play in tackling poverty, particularly for individuals with low incomes, with continued investment in these small but vital services making a significant contribution to addressing inequality.

65. The Improvement Service published the [findings of the National Planning Improvement Champion’s call for ideas](#). The report found that there is no overall agreement on what

successful planning looks like, that the reduced resources available to planning authorities is a key issue, and that there is a clear need to ensure a strong pipeline of people entering the profession, as well as to provide training and support for elected members on their roles, responsibilities and powers. The importance of collaboration rather than a ‘them and us’ culture was also highlighted. The evidence gathered from the ‘call for ideas’ has been used to inform the development of a pilot National Planning Improvement Framework that will help planning authorities assess their performance and identify areas for improvement, with the existing approach in which the Scottish Government assesses performance being replaced by a collaborative peer review process involving a wider range of stakeholders.

66. The Improvement Service earlier provided a [brief update on its local government transformation programme](#) with Solace Scotland. Launch meetings have been held for six short-term projects which will develop and implement changes, in the areas of procurement, statutory duties, Crerar implementation, digital shared services, developing a digital ‘to-be’ state, and active communities. Meanwhile the Leadership Practitioner Forum – a network for aspiring Chief Executives, Directors and Heads of Service, that is being run as part of the transformation programme – was due to be hold its latest meeting on 29 February, focusing on 2024/25 Budgets and the Verity House Agreement.
67. COSLA and the Scottish Government [published the initial 2-year delivery plan for their new Dementia Strategy “Everyone's Story”](#). The delivery plan sets out how the Scottish Government and COSLA will work with those who have lived experience of dealing with dementia as well as delivery partners to realise the vision for change of a person-centred approach to providing support, treatment and care which is set out in the strategy.
68. COSLA President [Shona Morrison congratulated Heather Woodbridge](#) on becoming the new Leader of Orkney Islands Council – the council’s first female leader, and the youngest in Scotland. Ms Woodbridge replaces James Stockan, who has retired as a councillor.

## Updates on previous queries

None

## Consultations

69. A response to the [Wellbeing and Sustainable Development \(Scotland\) Bill consultation](#) was submitted on behalf of the Commission, Audit Scotland and the Auditor General. The response is available to view [on the Audit Scotland website](#).
70. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government has published an [independent analysis of responses to the consultation on A Human Rights Bill for Scotland](#), which ran from June to October 2023. The Commission, Audit Scotland and the Auditor General submitted a [joint response](#) to the consultation. That joint response is cited twice in the analysis, both times within the section on [Duties](#) (under questions 23 and 26).
71. The following recommendations are made by the Secretary and Audit Scotland staff regarding whether to respond to recently-opened Scottish Government consultations:
- [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill](#) (closing date: 21 April)  
**Recommendation: No response.**  
Most of the questions ask to what extent you agree or disagree with different proposals relating to Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence, and we don’t have audit

evidence to draw on. We could make some general points such as about the value of having more specific data to help with decision-making and monitoring, but as we have not carried out work on the cost and opportunity cost of public bodies doing that to the level set out in the consultation, we could only say we agree with the general principle but make the point about the cost of doing it, which would have limited value.

- [Scotland's draft Circular Economy and Waste Route Map to 2030](#) (closing date: 15 Mar)  
**Recommendation: No response.**

There would be little value in responding. The questions are focused on the extent to which we agree with the Government's priority actions, and it would be inappropriate for us to comment on its strategic direction or what it should prioritise in its policy and legislative programme. Also, we haven't done any audit work in this area since 2010 so we do not have any recent evidence to draw upon to support a response or highlight any significant risks or issues. We will continue to monitor progress with the Bill as part of wider work to inform audit work on climate change and the environment.

- [Climate change - draft Scottish National Adaptation Plan 3](#) (closing date: 24 April)  
**Recommendation to follow.**

This consultation seeks views on the Scottish Government's draft new plan for adapting to climate change – Scottish National Adaptation Plan 2024-29, which is due to be published in Autumn 2024. An audit on climate change adaptation is currently at the scoping stage, and the questions in this consultation are currently being reviewed as to whether it would be appropriate for us to respond.

**72.** The Secretary will advise verbally during the meeting of any changes or updates in relation to these or any other consultations.

**73.** The Commission is invited to agree to the recommendations above.