

RESPONSE TO SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT'S PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM COMMITTEE PRE-BUDGET SCRUTINY CALL FOR VIEWS: *HOW CAN THE SCOTTISH BUDGET BEST ADVANCE PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM?*



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About Aberlour

Aberlour is the largest solely Scottish children's charity. Delivering more than sixty services, we work with babies, children, young people and families, providing services and support in communities across Scotland. We work with them to overcome challenges including the impact of drugs and alcohol, growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, living with a disability, experience of domestic abuse, and the impact of poverty and disadvantage. Aberlour offers compassionate support to babies, children, young people and families and supports them in their journey to heal and grow.

Introduction

Aberlour welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for views on public service reform, and to share our view on how such reform can be progressed through efficiencies and preventative budgeting. In 2011 The Christie Commission set out a clear direction for how best Scotland could deliver early, preventative help and support rooted in place-based, public service delivery that works for people and communities¹. In Scotland there is no shortage of understanding or evidence of what this should look like, but over the last fifteen years we have failed to implement such changes at the scale or with the sustained investment required to transform how public services are commissioned, funded and delivered to meet this ambition.

Delivering good public services is essential to creating a fairer and more equal society. If our ambition is to ensure Scotland's public services meet the needs of all of our citizens and communities then that requires the necessary investment. Our public services must be driven by a clear understanding of what works and what people and communities themselves feel will meet their needs and improve their lives. This means services must be accessible, flexible and adaptable, rather than people and communities having to fit into the services and systems we have created.

Effective public service delivery must be rooted in a rights-based approach, providing early help and support as an entitlement (not a privilege or 'luxury') as and when people need it, helping to prevent challenges in their lives escalating into crises. Incorporation of the UNCRC insists that the human rights of Scotland's children and young people must be respected, protected and fulfilled, including through public services that uphold and deliver those rights.

The third sector currently plays a critical (although often unrecognised) role in the delivery of public services alongside the public sector, particularly across health, education and social work services. However, the third sector cannot continue to act as a key partner in public

¹ [Christie Commission on the future delivery of public services - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/publications/christie-commission-2011/pages/1-1-introduction.aspx)

service delivery if inadequate budgets and funding result in services no longer being sustainable. Scotland's public sector and third sector need to deliver together to reach all children and families who need support in the way that they need it, for as long as they need it.

Public service reform must ensure our public services are informed by, aligned with and contribute to Scotland's identified national priorities on ending child poverty, Keeping The Promise, reducing drugs harm, and responding to Scotland's housing emergency. This means public services doing things differently, as the status quo is clearly not working. By ensuring a holistic approach to better connect public services to help meet the needs of Scotland's communities, Scotland can better align our public sector bodies, agencies and services with shared policy aims on tackling child poverty, supporting families and creating public services that work for our citizens and help to meet those national priorities.

1. The Scottish Government aims to deliver on average £0.5 billion in savings through efficiencies per year for the next three years (2026-27 to 2028-29):

a. To what extent are these savings achievable, and how will they shape public service delivery?

At this stage, there is insufficient detail to determine whether the proposed savings are achievable or how they will shape public service delivery. The budget decision-making process will determine much of how the public service reform agenda is delivered. Without clearer information on where efficiencies will be made, how savings will be realised, and what impact they will have on babies, children and families, it is not possible to say how achievable these savings are while maintaining effective public services.

We are particularly concerned about any changes that affect direct financial support for families. Direct financial support, such as the Scottish Child Payment, is one of the most effective ways government is able to respond to the impact of poverty. The reduction of £2 million in benefits expenditure within Social Justice over the next three years requires further explanation. If the Scottish Government intends to retain all 17 devolved benefits and continue existing support, the budget must explain what this reduction means in practice for low income families and households.

What may appear to be a simple reform or efficiency at government level can affect the quality, frequency or accessibility of support experienced by babies, children and families. Therefore, any change that may reduce the quality or availability of support must be clearly identified and assessed.

In our view public service reform must be a transformational programme, not simply an efficiencies exercise. A preventative approach is well evidenced in improving outcomes and

reducing long-term costs, but it requires a whole-system approach that creates earlier help, effective support and sustains communities. Delivering this will reduce the need for crisis intervention, which evidence clearly shows has both an economic and human cost.

The Independent Care Review's 'Follow the Money'² work provides an important framework for public service reform in Scotland, illustrating the costs of care, the costs of failure and the costs associated with lost contribution. Public service reform should therefore focus on reducing the need for later, more costly interventions by investing earlier in babies, children, families and communities.

b. What progress is being made towards achieving these efficiencies?

We recognise that work is underway to create efficiencies across the public sector, including workforce savings, programme efficiencies and digital solutions, much of it delivered through the Scottish Government's Spend to Save projects. However, we are unable to provide a view on what progress currently is towards achieving these efficiencies. It would be helpful for the Scottish Government to set out how these measures have created both financial savings and service delivery improvements as an illustration of what they believe public service reform can look like.

c. What are the barriers to achieving greater efficiency and how can these be addressed?

Too often we see through our work that the views, experiences and needs of families can be treated as secondary to systems, budgets and processes. If public service reform means supporting people better, outcomes for babies, children and families must be at the centre of decision-making, even, and especially, where this challenges decision makers to think differently about how those systems, budgets and processes are designed.

People's lives do not fit neatly into thematic policy areas. Aberlour supports babies, children and families whose lives are affected by poverty, disability, substance use, trauma and growing up in care, amongst many other intersecting challenges they often face. Better connected, more coherent and less siloed funding, service design and policy development would help to make sure public services work more effectively in response to the range of challenges in babies, children and families' lives.

Short-term and fragmented funding cycles are too often inefficient in delivering on what they intend to, resulting in services that are unable to effectively meet the needs of people and communities. Such short-term funding creates insecurity around the sustainability and

² [Follow-the-money.pdf](#)

availability of those services, within the workforce and amongst those who rely on them. Services and support that can clearly evidence a positive impact should be secured with sustained investment to continue to deliver for the people and communities they serve.

2. How should the Scottish Government best present the extent of any realised efficiencies in the annual budget publication, including providing clarity on whether these are expected to be recurring savings?

The annual budget publication should provide much greater detail on what efficiencies look like in practice. High-level figures do not provide enough clarity about the direction of travel, the services affected, whether savings are recurring or one-off, and what practical impact they will have on families and communities.

We welcome the Scottish Government's spending review emphasis on additional investment in prevention. However, reductions in spending must be shown openly and transparently. The budget should set out both the investment being made in prevention and any consequential reductions that may affect access to service and support, so that those affected by changes to budgets can prepare for change and scrutinise whether reform is genuinely improving outcomes.

4. What actions can the Scottish Government take to ensure these workforce reductions are delivered in a managed way which best supports effective government and public service delivery?

Before setting out any plans for workforce reductions, the Scottish Government should assess the impact of workforce changes on the support provided to babies, children, families, and communities, particularly where reductions may affect access to frontline public services, including health, education, social work. This should extend to any impact such reductions will have on the delivery of vital third sector services, such as family support, financial wellbeing, recovery or disability services. Where it is clear any workforce reductions undermine efforts towards our national ambitions, including ending child poverty, Keeping The Promise, reducing drugs harm or Scotland's housing emergency, then we would caution the Scottish Government against making such decisions and instead look for efficiencies in other areas of government spending.

5. The PSR strategy states that it will protect frontline services. To what extent is there sufficient clarity about how frontline roles are defined and how efficiencies in back-office functions can be delivered in a way that minimises impact on the delivery of public services?

There is not yet sufficient clarity about how frontline services or frontline roles are defined. As part of their public service reform strategy the Scottish Government should set out a clearer definition of frontline services and explain how decisions will be made about which roles, functions and services are protected. We would urge them to reflect third sector services as part of their definition of frontline services and to provide an assessment of how the public service reform strategy captures the value and impact of third sector services as part of public service delivery in Scotland. Any reform to ‘back-office’ functions should avoid shifting administrative burdens onto frontline workers whose time and capacity should be focused on supporting those accessing services.

6. Beyond the financial benefits that the Public Service Reform (PSR) Strategy aims to achieve, what are the key outcomes that reform should be aiming for?

Public service reform should aim to improve the lives of Scotland’s babies, children, families and communities. This should be the fundamental purpose of any proposed reforms. Scotland’s public services are vital to helping us meet our national ambitions. Ending child poverty cannot be achieved without the delivery of effective public services that are designed to respond the needs of babies, children and families experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Public services should be a driver of creating a fairer and more equal society, by making sure all those who need extra help and support can easily get that help and support where and when they need it in order to help them thrive. Not everyone will need or want to access public services, but for those who rely on them they must be available and accessible in communities where people need them.

Reform should also strengthen a rights-based approach to the delivery of public services. This means services that are accessible, compassionate, trauma-informed, designed around people and place, preventative and ready and able to meet families’ needs. Economic benefits and financial savings should be understood as a consequence of better outcomes and earlier help and support, not the driving purpose of public service reform.

7. The PSR Strategy includes 18 different workstreams which aim to remove barriers to reform.

One workstream focuses on “simplification”, recognising that “complexity of processes, structures and reporting requirements is a key barrier to effective and efficient service delivery”.

“Prevention” is one of three pillars providing structure to the Strategy.

a. What should the Scottish Government's priorities be under its simplification workstream and what level of savings can be achieved through this approach?

The Scottish Government should begin by mapping how different systems are experienced by babies, children and families, identifying where complexity creates delay, duplication, confusion or unmet need. Starting with the challenges families face will create better outcomes and identify where efficiencies can realistically be made. Simplification should mean designing services, support and resources around the needs and rights of babies, children, young people and families.

b. What progress has been made to date with preventative budgeting?

At Aberlour we have a range of examples of taking alternative approaches and delivering services differently, often in collaboration with local authorities, to support children and families who need extra help. Through our work we can evidence what public service reform in action can look like.

Below we have provided examples of our work to tackle public debt, reduce drugs harms for women and their babies and deliver whole family support, all of which illustrate ways in which public services can improve the lives of babies, children and families as well as deliver cost savings to the public purse.

Tackling Public Debt

Working with local authorities across Scotland, Aberlour has shown how our system of public debt recovery, including council tax, rent arrears and even school meal debt, can be handled very differently by local authorities. This can relieve households of escalating and unmanageable debt and connect families to other types of support to provide the practical, emotional and financial support they need to tackle financial insecurity that contributes to family strain and too often can trap babies, children and families in poverty.

Our Family Financial Wellbeing Pilot in Tayside, working in partnership with Dundee, Angus and Perth and Kinross Councils, has shown how local authorities and third sector can work collaboratively to support families affected by problem public debt, and to develop new and different methods of debt recovery, prioritising family wellbeing over punitive debt recovery practices³. Our pilot focuses on supporting families' financial wellbeing as part of a wider offer

³ [Evaluation-of-Tayside-Family-Financial-Wellbeing-Project.pdf](#)

of holistic, whole-family support that understands families' circumstances and what will help to alleviate problem public debt that too often traps families in poverty.

A common issue we encounter through our public debt work is families faced with eviction and becoming homeless due to rent arrears or housing related debts to their local council. However, the associated long-term costs to that same council of supporting the family once they are homeless far outweigh the value of the debt owed. Shelter Scotland research shows the average cost of a single eviction to a local authority is nearly £20,000⁴. Doing debt recovery differently means responding to families' circumstances with compassion and offers of services and support, which can better prevent eviction and homelessness for families. The costs of responding in this way are substantially less than housing families' in temporary accommodation, not to mention the cost savings from other services that families may require due to being homeless and the consequent family strain.

The impact of our work with local authorities to do debt recovery differently has been evidenced through families who may otherwise have become homeless being able to maintain their tenancy, children at risk of being accommodated being able to stay with their family, and parents who faced barriers to employment due to the impact of problem debt on their mental health being able to return to work. All of these outcomes reduce the likelihood of costly, crisis interventions and greater demand on public services now and in the future. Public service reform must include doing debt recovery differently by not only protecting those most at risk from problem public debt but also preventing it in the first place.

Reducing Drugs Harm

Aberlour currently delivers vital and dedicated Intensive Family Support services on behalf of the Scottish Government across Scotland. This includes two national Mother and Child Recovery Houses (MCRHs) and three regional Intensive Perinatal community-based services. These services provide intensive, trauma-informed and holistic support to mothers affected by substance use and their children, from pregnancy through to early childhood. Aberlour worked in partnership with the Scottish Government, local and national stakeholders, and families to develop the specialist models of care. We have demonstrated that we have reduced risk, prevented harm, and improved outcomes for babies, children and women. Families have described this support as life-changing and lifesaving.

The cost savings associated with these services are substantial. For every £1 invested in our MCRHs they are estimated to generate more than £10 in social value, with savings of up to £8m to the public purse in a single year for around a quarter of that invested⁵. Those savings are

⁴ [Final cost of evictions report.pdf](#)

⁵ [evaluation-aberlour-mcrh-dundee-svl.pdf](#)

primarily through keeping families together and preventing babies from being accommodated in foster care. In addition, Aberlour's Intensive Perinatal Services have shown that for a total cost of £1 million per year to deliver across three different regional areas in Scotland it can generate cost savings of between £4-6 million. In our Intensive Perinatal Service in Falkirk alone it has been evidenced that an estimated £14 is saved for every £1 spent delivering the service⁶. These savings occur primarily through the prevention of children being accommodated and reducing families' need for further help and support from health and social work services in the longer term. Savings that can be reinvested in impactful early intervention and prevention services.

We know early and intensive support improves family wellbeing and reduces the need for statutory support. Aberlour has effective Intensive Family Services that support babies, children and mothers affected by substance use and trauma. However, without continued, sustainable funding models, there is a risk that babies, children and mothers in recovery will be at increased risk of harm, creating additional need for statutory care and intervention.

Whole Family Support

Aberlour is one of Scotland's largest providers of family support services in Scotland, supporting more than 5500 children and their families in communities across the country. We currently deliver Scotland's biggest family support service on behalf of Glasgow City Council working with around 300 families across the city. Our Family Support Services provide a range of accessible, community-based family support to help disadvantaged babies, children, young people and families right across Scotland. Our services are located in communities to provide help and support to families in the community and at home, working in partnership with social work, education, health and advice services, as well as other third sector partners to respond to the, often intersecting, challenges in families' lives.

This holistic approach to whole family support responds to the immediate needs of children and families through a single trusted third sector partner to help and support family wellbeing, whilst connecting children and families to wider community services reducing demand on front line services in the longer term. The combination of early help and more intensive support as required for families contributes to a reduction in demand on statutory services. In Glasgow, the delivery of holistic whole family support for families across the city has been shown to be a core component of the Council's own work on public service reform, improving outcomes for babies, children and families while enabling a shift from crisis intervention to early help and support⁷.

⁶ [Aberlour | Evaluation of Aberlour's Intensive Perinatal Service in Falkirk](#)

⁷ [Public Service Reform in Action: Learning from Glasgow's approach to tackling child poverty](#)

To meet our national ambitions, Scotland must increase the capacity and reach of our holistic family support services, which are crucial to help overcome challenges in families' lives, to help keep families together and to support and enable them to thrive. This is a fundamental element of preventative public service delivery which requires further investment to deliver the transformational change required to enable local services to effectively respond to families' needs at home and in the community. Public service reform must not result in a diminishing of such vital services for families, but instead disinvesting in what we know does not work and reinvesting in services that are proven to support better outcomes and improve the lives of babies, children and families.

These examples show that preventative budgeting can work where investment is directed towards support that provides extra help and support, responds to need, prevents harm, stabilises families and reduces later demand. However, it remains true that too much preventative work across Scotland remains dependent on short-term, insecure or pilot funding rather than being embedded as a core part of public service delivery.

c. How should the forthcoming Budget support greater progress towards preventative budgeting across the devolved public sector? Please set out any barriers and how these can be addressed.

The upcoming Budget should support preventative budgeting by protecting and increasing investment in early help and support services that reduce the likelihood of crisis, including whole family support. However, preventative spending cannot come at the expense of intensive support that many families across Scotland currently rely on. There is still significant unmet need and many families are already facing complex and entrenched challenges in their lives that require ongoing and longer-term support.

Barriers include short-term funding, siloed budgets, pressure to fund crisis responses, lack of shared outcome measurements, data and information and insufficient transparency about how savings are expected to be realised. These can be addressed through a commitment to multi-year funding for services which have demonstrated their value and impact, shared budgets across policy areas, stronger partnership with the third sector, rights-based impact assessments, and budget reporting that follows whether investment has reduced need for later intervention.

d. What changes to the Scottish Government's approach to budget-setting are needed to effectively deliver public service reform?

The Scottish Government should move towards budget-setting that is longer term, more transparent, more preventative and more clearly connected to outcomes for children and families. To deliver public service reform effectively, budget-setting should follow the money

across systems, including the costs of late intervention, failure demand and lost contribution. It should also provide clearer evidence on whether efficiencies are recurring, how they impact service delivery, and whether savings are being reinvested in early help and prevention. Above all, the budget process should be designed around the needs and rights of babies, children, families and communities, not around maintaining existing systems that don't help Scotland meet its ambitions.

For more information contact Martin Canavan (Head of Policy & Influencing)

Martin.Canavan@aberlour.org.uk