

Response from CELCIS to the Public Service Reform Committee's Call for Views on Public Service Reform: Pre-budget scrutiny 2027-28

August 2026

Information about your organisation

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, based at the University of Strathclyde, is a leading improvement, innovation and research centre. CELCIS plays a leading role in supporting improvement and reform across Scotland's children's services landscape, working alongside national and local partners and drawing on the expertise of people with lived experience of care and the practitioners who support them to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

A distinctive aspect of our work is supporting the connection between national policy and local implementation, with a focus on keeping The Promise of the Independent Care Review, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC), and child protection. We work alongside the Scottish Government and local partnerships as they translate policy ambitions into practice, helping to understand what enables successful implementation, where barriers arise, and how learning from delivery can inform future policy and reform. This includes our current work supporting delivery of the Whole Family Wellbeing Funding programme and Fairer Futures Partnerships, working alongside local service leaders as they navigate the practical challenges of delivering whole-system Public Service Reform.

This response is offered through the lens of children's services and social care, recognising that public service reform spans a much wider landscape. We believe children's services provide important lessons about how reform can improve outcomes, reduce future demand on other services, and deliver greater long-term value across the public sector. All approaches to reforming services must recognise the role that poverty

and inequality play as drivers of demand across public services, and the importance of addressing these factors early and effectively.

We welcome the opportunity to submit our views in response to the Public Service Reform Committee's call for views on Pre-budget Scrutiny 2027–28. Our response draws on research evidence, practical experience and extensive insight gathered through our long-standing relationships with national and local partners. This includes leaders and practitioners working across children and family services and wider public services, and children, families and people with lived experience of care. As such, our response reflects both the strategic ambitions of reform and the practical realities of implementing change within complex public service systems.

Our response is also informed by CELCIS's Children's Services Reform Research (CSRR), which explored the conditions required for successful whole-system reform and the challenges leaders face in delivering sustainable change. The findings reinforce many of the principles set out in the Christie Commission, including prevention, partnership, participation and a focus on outcomes, while highlighting the practical conditions needed to translate these ambitions into lasting change. This recent research, combined with our practical experience of supporting implementation, provides a unique perspective on the opportunities and barriers associated with public service reform.

Question 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 a need for greater clarity about what is meant by 'frontline services'. If the intention is to protect the services that have the greatest impact on outcomes for people and communities, consideration should extend beyond statutory and crisis response services to include

preventative and early support. These services are often the first point of contact for children, families and communities and play a critical role in reducing the need for more intensive interventions later. Protecting frontline services should therefore include protecting the preventative services that reduce future demand.

If the intention is to make a distinction between frontline roles and services and back-office functions, then this risks oversimplifying how public services operate in practice. Effective frontline delivery depends on a range of enabling functions, including leadership, improvement capability, data and digital infrastructure, workforce development, finance, commissioning and partnership co-ordination. These functions are not functional administrative support; they create the conditions for high-quality, responsive services. Opportunities to improve efficiency should focus on reducing duplication, strengthening collaboration and redesigning processes across organisational boundaries, rather than reducing the capacity needed to support effective delivery.

Public services function as an interconnected system, meaning that decisions taken in one part of the system can have significant consequences elsewhere. Efficiencies realised in one service may unintentionally generate additional demand elsewhere in the system because needs have not been addressed effectively at an earlier stage. For example, reducing investment in preventative and early support may deliver short-term savings for one organisation or service provider while increasing demand for more intensive and costly interventions elsewhere in the public service system over time. These impacts are often experienced by different services, organisations or budgets, making them less visible within traditional approaches to financial planning and performance management. A whole-system perspective is therefore essential to ensure that efficiencies are assessed not only by the savings they generate for individual organisations, but by their overall impact on outcomes, future demand and value across the public service system.

Identifying sustainable efficiencies requires a detailed understanding of how people experience services within local systems, ensuring that

services are organised around people's needs rather than organisational boundaries. This includes understanding examining how children, young people and families move between services, where support is working well, where there are unnecessary gaps or duplication, and where resources could be better aligned to improve outcomes. Similar analysis should be applied to enabling functions across organisations to understand where processes, governance, data-sharing and planning can be streamlined or better aligned. Decisions about service redesign should therefore be informed by local evidence and analysis, rather than assumptions about where efficiencies can be realised.

Improving the efficiency of enabling functions should not be viewed as a technical exercise alone. Achieving greater collaboration across organisations requires time and capacity to develop shared outcomes, build relationships, align governance and commissioning arrangements, establish effective data-sharing practices, and create shared approaches to planning and decision-making. This also requires sustained leadership to create the conditions for collaboration, build trust across organisational boundaries and support collective decision-making throughout the reform process. These changes are complex and iterative and are unlikely to be realised through short-term efficiency programmes alone. The Public Service Reform agenda therefore provides an important opportunity to develop and learn from implementation in local systems before considering wider adoption. Building evidence through implementation will strengthen the long-term sustainability of reform, support more informed investment decisions, and reduce the risk of unintended consequences.

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Question 6

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

The primary purpose of public service reform should be to create the conditions in which better outcomes for people, families and communities can be achieved. At a time of significant fiscal constraint and increasing demand for public services in Scotland, reform provides an opportunity to

improve outcomes while supporting more effective use of limited public resources to deliver greater long-term public value. Successful reform should enable people to access the right support at the right time, experience services that are more joined up and responsive to their needs, and have confidence that public services work together to deliver the support they need. Over time, this should contribute to improved wellbeing, reduced inequalities, more sustainable public services and better outcomes for communities across Scotland.

However, achieving this requires more than delivering financial savings alone. While recognising the significant fiscal challenges facing Scotland, public service reform also requires a sustained focus on how organisations, and critically the leaders within them, work together across organisational boundaries towards shared outcomes. This is less about structural change and more about creating the conditions for organisations to build trusted relationships, develop shared approaches to planning and decision-making, make better use of evidence and data, and continually learn and adapt in response to changing needs. These capabilities are fundamental to delivering sustainable improvements in outcomes and making better use of public resources over the longer term.

This shift will depend on strengthening the ability of leaders and partnerships to make informed strategic investment decisions. This includes improving how evidence is generated, shared and used to support better decision-making. This means strengthening the ability to understand what is working, where demand is changing, how investment in one part of the system affects another, and which approaches create the greatest long-term value for people, communities and the wider public service system. Strengthening this evidence base will better equip local leaders to make informed decisions about where to invest, where to redesign, and where resources could be used most effectively to improve outcomes. Given the new ways of working that this would entail, collaborative leadership will require the development of new skills and behaviours, requiring external support and facilitation to effectively embed them.

Realising these ambitions will also require a more coherent and integrated public service system. The plans to increase alignment of funding streams, outcomes and national priorities is a positive direction of travel and is widely welcomed by local partnerships. The next challenge is strengthening how these ambitions are realised in delivery, enabling organisations to work differently together around shared outcomes.

Translating this ambition into practice requires time, sustained support and protected capacity for local leaders to develop shared outcomes, governance and ways of working across organisational boundaries. Bringing together funding, planning and reporting arrangements across organisations and programmes requires partners to develop shared outcomes, build trust, establish new governance and accountability arrangements, and agree how success will be measured collectively. This represents a significant shift from traditional ways of working and cannot be achieved through structural change alone. Reform should therefore create the time and space for local partnerships to develop these new ways of working, reducing unnecessary duplication while enabling greater collaboration, shared learning and more effective use of public resources to improve outcomes for people, families and communities.

A strong reciprocal relationship between Scottish Government and local partnerships is essential. While national policy provides strategic direction, the practical challenges of implementation are best understood by being alongside local systems as these develop, to test and refine new ways of working. This creates opportunities for continuous learning about what enables collaboration, where barriers remain, and how national policy, funding and support can adapt in response. Remaining closely connected to implementation will strengthen collective ownership of reform, support more responsive decision-making, and help ensure that future policy, investment and reform activity are informed by practical experience as well as strategic ambition.

Ultimately, successful reform of public services should be understood as a phased process of implementation, learning and adaptation. While important foundations can be established in the short term, developing

the capabilities required for sustainable whole-system reform will require continued commitment and investment over the longer term. This was explored in Strand 2 of our Children's Services Reform Research: Case Studies of Transformational Reform.

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