

@BRIEF

Bargaining and Campaigns



PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM – OUR RESPONSE

UNISON has serious concerns about the government’s chosen approach to public sector reform.

Improving services cannot be driven by cuts and this is a cuts agenda. This is clear from the way ministers are framing 'reform'. Closing a budget gap rather than service improvement is the starting point set out in government documents. The starting premise that the public sector is overstaffed couldn’t be further from the truth.

- The ‘most radical reshaping of public services’ since devolution must not be driven by financial targets and it cannot be rushed.
- A 3-month timescale for consulting and reaching agreement on the future of both local government and social care is not credible and undermines the assurance of an open and transparent process.
- The targets set appear crudely drawn and lack vital detail: £1.7 billion extracted from public services over 3 years and an estimated 20,000 job losses (0.5% workforce reduction annually for 5 years).
- There are no specifics regarding which public services could sustain these cuts. We can see no assessment of the size of workforce needed to deliver public services to meet current and projected demand and a plan of exactly where and how reductions of this size could feasibly be made.

We also have concerns about the credibility of the arguments presented.

The assertion that these targets can be met with no negative impact on service delivery does not stand up. “Efficiency savings” – cuts - will be used to close the fiscal gap, not reinvest in services.

- Public services are people-intensive and workforce cuts mean service cuts.
- Understaffing and specialist skills shortages are the main problems across our public services. More, not fewer, public sector workers are required to meet unmet need, new legislative requirements, and rising projected demand in many service areas.
- After 15 years of austerity budgets the scope for further job losses and ‘efficiency savings’ is limited, especially in local government and further education. The real

problem is a recruitment and retention crisis in many service areas and a lack of workforce planning.

- There is an assurance that job losses will be through natural attrition, but this carries known risks for organisations.

The distinction being made between ‘frontline’ and ‘back office’ is mistaken. There is one team in public service delivery and past reforms based on this premise at both national and local level have proven to be a false economy. In the case of Police Scotland it led to inefficiencies and poorer service delivery as police officers were substituted for support staff.

The argument is thin that service quality can be improved or a shift to prevention achieved with fewer resources and financial instability. The prevention agenda of the Christie Commission requires secure upfront investment not contracting budgets, which have driven change in the opposite direction, concentrating resources around the most acute need and undermining collaboration.

The arguments overlook the learning from years of reform to public services using digitisation, automation, outsourcing, restructuring, estate rationalisation and shared services in response to budget cuts and the scope for any further efficiencies via these routes. Financial “efficiencies” have come with other costs. In rural areas and the islands centralisation has caused barriers to access and has driven inequality with adverse impacts on population retention and community sustainability.

We must learn the lessons of earlier public service reform exercises and avoid repeating errors.

The fundamental problem is not structural, and structural change is itself costly. We believe a better approach is to raise income through a long-term strategy embracing progressive tax reform and aimed at stimulating economic growth through strategic use of public investment in areas that will save public money. We need a public sector-led economic recovery.

Services face rising demand due to demographic and climate change and the impact of austerity. There is significant unmet need for many services. We need an honest assessment of what services we need, the workforce needed to deliver them now and in future, and then an honest conversation about how they should change and how they are funded.

Tapping into the knowledge and expertise held at all levels of public sector organisations is the key to improvement. Our 150,000 members work across the police service, health, tertiary education, local government, public bodies. They understand as well as anyone how systems work, where they could work better and how services can be improved.

The public sector is critical to the success of our national and local economies. It provides essential infrastructure, nurtures and develops the future labour force and generates jobs and vital spending that can build wealth in local communities.

High quality public services are essential for a socially just and cohesive society. They are not a 'last resort' safety net. Failure to invest in services to meet the population's needs has social, economic and political consequences which are already being felt.

UNISON's tests for public service reform

UNISON believes in the principles of democracy, partnership, fairness, investment and excellence in public services. We will test any public service reform proposals against these:

- **Democracy:** devolve and decentralise decision-making and control of services to the most appropriate local democratic structure.
Public bodies should as far as possible be directly elected and quangos democratised. Maximise local democratic control and accountability for how services are delivered.
- **Partnership** – design and deliver public services in partnership through the genuine participation of citizens, users and staff.
- **Fairness** – The process for public service reforms must be fair and achieve fair outcomes including the fair treatment of staff.
- Reforms should achieve fair and equitable outcomes across the country and avoid disadvantage to rural and island communities or worsening inequality within them.
- **Investment** - Excellent, fair, and democratic public services cannot happen without adequate long-term investment. Reform should not be a byword for cuts to services, which have already been stripped to the bone.
- **Excellence** - Scotland's public services should, and could, be world leading and performance should be measured appropriately. Cutting costs and outsourcing ends up costing more both financially, and in service quality.

Actions for Branches

- **Communicate with members** to ensure they are informed about the implications of the government's Programme for Government and wider public sector reform strategy.
- **Engage with all staff** on the importance of trade union membership – there has never been a more important time to be a member of UNISON
- **All UNISON members** should ensure that their contact details are up to date, and their myUNISON member portal is activated

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Additional information:

[Public Service Reform Committee: Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2027/28 - UNISON Scotland](#)
[MSP briefing - urgent questions needing answers about public sector reform - UNISON Scotland](#)
[Public sector reform in social care and local government - UNISON Scotland](#)
[Public service reform in health - UNISON Scotland](#)
[Public service reform in non-departmental public bodies - UNISON Scotland](#)
[Artificial intelligence in public service reform - UNISON Scotland](#)