

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM IN NON-DEPARTMENTAL PUBLIC BODIES

Introduction

The public sector reform (PSR) strategy is a cuts agenda. PSR is dressed in the language of prevention, empowerment and improvement, but there is no doubt that it is a cuts agenda.

UNISON warned before the election that this was coming. Now it is here. Driven by cost cutting a huge transformation is planned in how local services are governed and delivered.

The main aim is to cut headcount in the public sector as a way of reducing overall public sector pay costs. The targets are:

- 20,000 public sector job losses (a 0.5% cut each year, for 5 years)
- £1.7billion of public sector cuts in the first 3 years of this parliament.

What this means was set out in the programme for government (PfG) on 1 September. However, details are sparse and this briefing sets out what is known about the Scottish government's plans for non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) at this stage.

Wider Public Service Reform

The PfG proposes a major reform agenda including:

- 'Rationalisation' of Scotland's public body landscape.
- Mergers, consolidation and abolition of public bodies.
- Greater regional governance arrangements.
- Consolidation of procurement, estates, payment systems and shared services.
- New Public Service Renewal Bill to provide statutory backing for restructuring.

What public service reform means for non-departmental public bodies:

- Public bodies were a major target for public service reform in the programme for government. The government said "We will substantially reduce the number of public bodies to create a system that is integrated by design and that improves service delivery."
- The programme for government announced that the national environmental public bodies: SEPA, NatureScot, Zero Waste Scotland, and potentially Scottish Forestry will be merged into a single overarching body.
- Other public bodies are also likely to be targeted. The government said it will "consider further opportunities during this Parliamentary term as they arise, we expect these proposals to bring in other relevant bodies as they develop."

- The PfG also says that all remaining public bodies will be reviewed “for efficiency and exploring the opportunities for joint working or merger” and that public bodies performing inspectorate functions would be rationalised.

Key problems for UNISON

- UNISON’s members work in non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) in a range of functions. This programme for government represents a significant threat to these bodies, to jobs, and to the functioning of public services.
- The public service reform agenda is steeped in the false logic of ‘backroom staff’ whose roles don’t directly impact services. UNISON’s members know that these members of staff simply don’t exist. All staff working in public services are delivering those services.
- NDPBs and their staff provide essential services like protecting our environment, regulating care and safeguarding children.
- UNISON members working in NDPBs were not consulted, and were given no warning of this announcement, which has left them with uncertainty over their jobs. This will further impact on already stretched services and staff.
- The Scottish government said that the merger of environmental organisations was designed to remove unnecessary barriers, duplication of work, inefficiency and “make our environmental interventions more impactful”. It did not present any evidence to back up these claims.
- The public service reform agenda is about cutting services, not reforming them. Announcing cuts to NDPBs is one thing – it is another to explain how the Scottish government can cut jobs and budgets while maintaining or improving the services the public relies on.
- Audit Scotland published a very critical report on the Scottish government's programme to reform post-school education and the organisations which support post-school education. The programme transferred responsibility for apprenticeships to the Scottish Funding Council, previously the remit of Skills Development Scotland. This was a major shift in responsibility, and the number of staff who will be TUPE transferred is still unclear. The report found problems with the programme’s planning and governance, a lack of shared understanding of the purpose of the reform and poor engagement with organisations which would be affected by it.
- The Audit Scotland report is a warning of what happens when reform is poorly planned and done to rather than with public services and the workers which deliver them. It is also a warning about the potential quality of the public service reform the government is embarking on.
- The first minister has said he wants to open a period of intense engagement about the plans. While we do not have sufficient detail on these plans, UNISON will engage robustly and constructively with the government at every step.

UNISON’s tests for public service reform

UNISON believes in key 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.

Actions for Branches

- Communicate with members to ensure they are informed about the implications of the Scottish government's PfG 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

Additional Information

[Programme for government 2026-2031](#)

[Briefing 174 – Public service reform update](#)

[UNISON response – Public service reform committee call for views](#)

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