



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE01606](#)

Main Petitioner: Peter Gregson on behalf of Kids not Suits

Subject: Forcing Scottish councils to collaborate regionally on schools and roads

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to use its position in negotiations to set local authority budgets to ensure local authorities work together on a regional basis to provide education and transport services on a shared basis. Efficiencies could lead to staff being redeployed out of the back office and into front line services.

Background

The Petition is intended to encourage the Scottish Government to use the process for allocating funds to local authorities to force local authorities to “share services” for education and transport. The Petition states that:

“When the Regional Councils were abolished and replaced with our current unitary authorities [in 1996], we multiplied the administration of education and roads hugely, as each small authority sought to mimic the structures of the regional government they replaced. We bear those costs to this day.”

On this basis, the Petition infers that by sharing services, councils would make significant savings by cutting “back-office posts” and that these staff could then be redeployed “into the front line”. The Petition proposes the “creation of new regional education and transport authorities”, possibly in the form of Joint Boards, governed by elected members drawn from participating authorities.

The Petition recognises that there will be costs involved and notes that these will “need to be tightly controlled if savings are to be made”.

The concept of “shared services” has been prominent in the debate around public service reform for some time. Although smaller projects have been attempted in some areas, large scale reform on the basis as set out in the petition has not. In addition to adding stipulations to the local government settlement negotiations, it is possible that further primary legislation could be needed in order to achieve the Petitioner’s aims.

Headcount in local government has been steadily declining from its peak in the mid-2000s. From a high of 234,200 full time equivalent (FTE) staff (excluding police and fire) in 2006, the latest [Scottish Local Government Employment Statistics](#) show local government FTE headcount at 199,300 in Quarter 4 2015. Some of this reduction is due to local government staff transferring to arms-length external organisations (known as ALEOs), who are then classified as private sector employees.

Scottish Government Action

As the Petition notes, in 2011, the Commission on Future Delivery of Public Services (known as the “Christie Commission” [published its final report](#). Among other things, the Commission concluded that “our whole system of public services – public, third and private sectors – must become more efficient by reducing duplication and sharing services wherever possible.”

The Scottish Government’s [response to the Commission’s report](#) outlined its priorities for reform, built on “four pillars”, including “greater integration of public services at a local level driven by better partnership, collaboration and effective local delivery.”

Building on its response to the Christie Commission, the Government provides details of [wide-ranging programme of public service reform](#) on its website.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Session 4 Local Government and Regeneration Committee undertook a range of detailed work on public service reform, including shared services. In particular, [Strand 3 of its 3-strand inquiry into public service reform](#) focussed on the issue. The Committee concluded that:

“We are clear that there is a lot of activity in Scotland seeking to identify new ways of delivering services. We are also clear that almost all of it is well intentioned. We are less clear to what extent there is any cohesiveness or overall strategic intent to all this effort. [...] We are very clear that there is a major disjunction between the strategic and delivery levels in our public services that needs to be addressed if the Christie Commission’s vision is to be achieved. [...] Our main conclusion on Strand 3 is that a prerequisite for success in finding new ways of delivering services is a shared common understanding and purpose of the vision, aims, and purpose of any initiative. In simple terms, where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Allan Campbell
Senior Research Specialist
19 May 2016

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