



COSLA

# MANIFESTO 2026



Strong communities start with local government





## MANIFESTO INDEX

<b>5</b>	<a href="#"><u>PRESIDENT'S FOREWORD</u></a>
<b>7</b>	<a href="#"><u>INTRODUCTION/SCENE SETTING</u></a>
<b>8</b>	<a href="#"><u>OUR VISION AND PRINCIPLES</u></a>
<b>9</b>	<a href="#"><u>OUR CALLS TO THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT:</u></a>
<b>10</b>	SUSTAINABLE FINANCE FOR LOCAL SERVICES
<b>12</b>	LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT
<b>13</b>	OUR WORKFORCE
<b>14</b>	FUTURE GENERATIONS: SUPPORTING OUR FUTURE GENERATIONS TO THRIVE IN THE MODERN WORLD
<b>15</b>	THRIVING AND COHESIVE COMMUNITIES: THROUGH EFFECTIVE PUBLIC SERVICES
<b>16</b>	THRIVING PLACES: THROUGH SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH
<b>18</b>	<a href="#"><u>CONCLUSION</u></a>



**We call for  
a strategic approach  
to community cohesion  
to be developed for  
Scotland with  
local government,  
Scottish Government  
and civil society.**

## **PRESIDENT'S FOREWORD**



As President of COSLA I am proud to present to you our manifesto for the 2026 Holyrood election. The importance of this election cannot be overstated given the challenges we are now collectively facing. It is my strong belief that we can only overcome the threats our public services face by embracing local decision making and enabling individuals, families and communities to live well locally. This means recognising and valuing democracy in all of its forms starting with respect and trust in democracy closest to people - local government.

Why local government? Because direct accountability and decision making closest to those we live with and share our towns, villages and cities with, keeps us focused on local people, local families, their needs and their priorities. National government and our parliament set the conditions for change, but local government delivers change daily, it enhances opportunity for all, and it responds to people's everyday needs.

As local democratically elected representatives, councillors advocate, fight for and protect individual and collective rights. Together with the local government workforce they shape and deliver services to meet the ever-changing needs of their communities.

As we mark 50 years of being the representative voice of Scottish local government, this COSLA manifesto on behalf of our member councils is our ask to those that wish to form the next Scottish Government to recognise, respect and value the critical role that local government can and does play in our everyday lives.

Democracy doesn't stand still, it must be nourished, protected and strengthened. A strong, open and honest working relationship between local and national government is at the heart of ensuring we live in a Scotland that is cohesive, generous and offers the opportunity for everyone to thrive.

The asks set out below are our call to action, our offer of partnership and our collective ambition for the communities we serve, live in and trust. We stand ready to work with whoever forms the next Scottish Government to deliver real change based on recognising our individual and collective roles and responsibilities. An empowered local government is not a 'nice to have' it is a 'must have'.

**Councillor Shona Morrison**  
COSLA President



**For our communities to live well locally, councils are essential. Councils provide safer communities, housing, roads and transportation, education, social work and social care, environmental health, trading standards, mental health services, advice services, employability, recycling and waste services, libraries, leisure facilities and many more vital services that support and create opportunities for every community in Scotland.**

## **Introduction/ scene setting**



**£18bn**  
OVERALL  
LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT  
REVENUE



**£647m**  
PROJECTED  
NATIONAL  
BUDGET GAP



**11%**  
COUNCIL  
WORKFORCE  
REDUCED BY

Councils and locally elected councillors are the closest sphere of government to our communities. As our lives move increasingly online and the impact of global uncertainty is felt at home, local decision making and community are more important than ever. Our services are tailored to the needs of individuals, families and communities and we are fundamental to ensuring places across Scotland can thrive.

Those wishing to form the next Scottish Government must work with local government as equal partners to empower councils and local partners to continue to improve everyday life with our communities across rural, urban, island and mixed geographies. Without this commitment to work together as equal partners and avoid centralisation of policy-making, we are constrained in our ability to deliver lasting change, tackle inequalities and improve outcomes.

We must work together nationally and locally to avoid a decline in public services, focusing on outcomes rather than centralised 'input measures' such as teacher numbers and delayed discharge. In 2023, we were proud to sign the [Verity House Agreement](#) [Click Link] with the current Scottish Government, setting out a vision for a collaborative approach to delivering our shared priorities for the people of Scotland that we serve together.

We demand no less than a re-commitment to the principles of this agreement when the next parliament is formed.

# Our vision and principles



## VISION

COSLA will work relentlessly to ensure that Scottish local government has the powers and the resources it needs to deliver the highest quality services that enable everyone to live well locally.

In 2023, we published the [COSLA Plan](#) [Click Link] and this manifesto sets out how the next Scottish Government should support councils to achieve the vision and adhere to the principles of this plan.



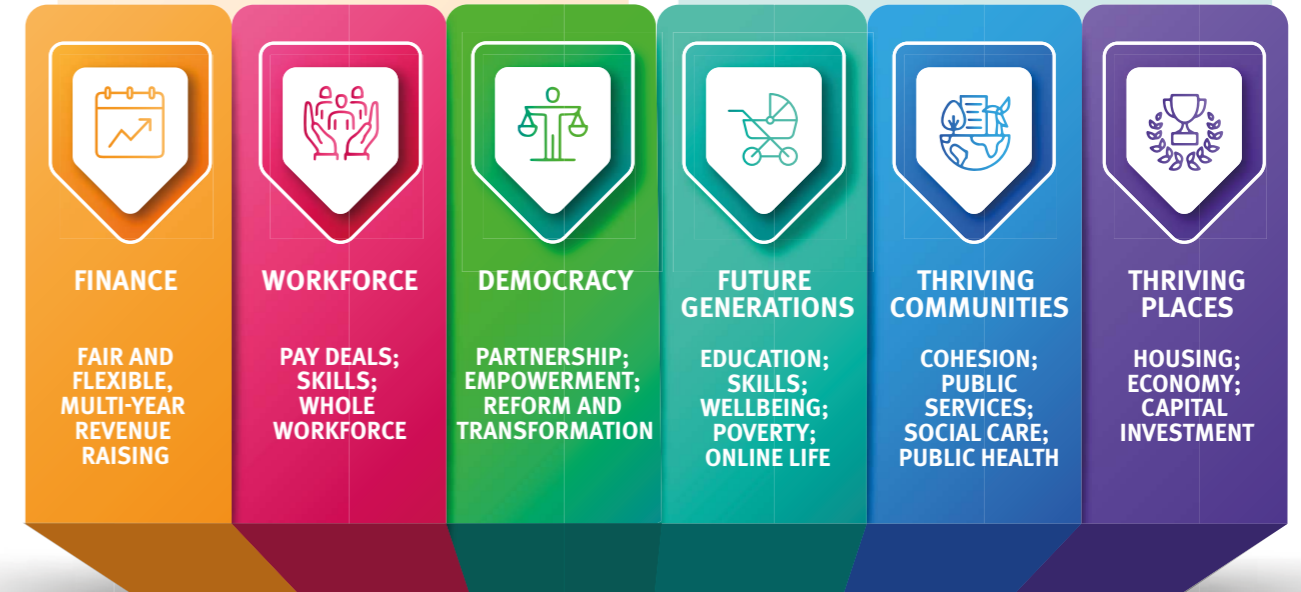
## PRINCIPLES

- Strong local democracy;
- Local partnership working;
- Delivering outcomes;
- Local choices;
- Community focus.

As Scotland heads into the 2026 Holyrood election, this vision is more relevant than ever. Four cross-cutting themes sit across our asks of the next Scottish Government.

### ENABLING PRIORITIES

### OUTCOMES - FOCUSED PRIORITIES



## Our calls to the next Scottish Government

This manifesto sets out what local government needs from Scottish Government to continue to serve local communities and enable us all to live well locally. Our key asks are grouped under six priority areas, divided into ‘enabling priorities’ focusing on key levers at our disposal (finance, workforce and democratic powers) which enable delivery of our ‘outcomes-focused priorities’ (future generations, thriving places and thriving communities).

We need Scottish Government to work together with local government, as equal partners, to deliver lasting change and improve outcomes.



1

### Putting communities and local decision making at the heart of public services

Ensuring policies are adapted to what works for communities whether rural, urban, island or mixed, including investing an additional £750m in social care.

2

### Tackling poverty and inequality of all kinds

Including our calls for a joint strategy to tackle poverty, recognising the role of gender in economic inequality and the need for resources to reward our staff with multi-year pay deals.

3

### Promoting sustainable economic growth locally

Levering local economies to thrive through a just transition to net zero, flexible funding and further revenue-raising powers. Tailored policy solutions to meet varied needs across Scotland’s communities and regional economies.

4

### Cohesive communities and civility in public life

Enabling Scotland to be welcoming, generous and courageous. A call for a strategic approach to community cohesion and for civility in public life, encouraging involvement by people from all walks of life, and standing against racism and discrimination.

# 1

## Sustainable finance for local services

The vital everyday services councils provide have disproportionately felt the brunt of public sector austerity and people in every community are now feeling the loss of these essential services. For our communities to thrive, councils must be on a sustainable financial footing and must be empowered to make decisions with communities around how resources are used.

We are calling for:

- **Increased, multi-year, flexible funding for Local government.** To deliver what is best for our communities, funding from the next Scottish Government should not be ringfenced, nor come with conditions attached that stifle local decision making. As part of this we are calling for an additional £750m in social care and increased funding to support vital infrastructure projects.
- **Freedom to raise revenue locally.** Empowering local government to work with communities and industry to raise revenue locally while supporting a vibrant economy from which everyone benefits.

- **Council Tax Reform.** A commitment to developing and implementing a fairer and more progressive council tax system within the next parliament that continues to be raised locally and enables and empowers councils to be responsive to local need.
- **Meaningful progress on exploring place-based funding.** Removing silos from public services by examining the needs of local communities and funding the place in its entirety rather than each sector as part of a joined-up approach to Public Service Reform.
- **Investment in prevention.** A decisive shift to enable place-based, preventative budgeting across the public sector and invest in services that truly tackle the root causes of inequality which are too often gendered in nature.



COSLA has long argued for fair and flexible funding for local government to maintain high quality services that meet local needs.

# 2

## Local Democracy and community empowerment



Public services work best when they are accountable, place-based and when decisions are taken with and as close to communities as possible. Scottish Government should work with us to avoid centralisation and ensure no community is left behind by embedding local, participative decision-making. Resources must be devolved to communities to address inequality, improve public health and address challenges presented by demographic change.

### We are calling for:

- **A re-commitment to the principles of the Verity House Agreement (VHA)** [Click Link]. Within the first six months, we expect the Scottish Government to recognise the legitimate democratic mandate held by Scottish local government and re-commit to the Verity House Agreement. Valuing our role as an equal sphere of democracy is key to improving outcomes.
- **Councils to be an equal partner in an approach to Public Service Reform which is local by default, national by agreement.** Reform and transformation should be delivered through a place-based lens with a renewed focus on community planning and community empowerment. A new Scottish Government must support councils to drive transformation locally, and, where appropriate, regionally, to improve the effectiveness of public services.

- **Civility in public life.** A new Scottish Government must work with local government to improve civility in public life and eradicate the abuse to which many elected members have been subjected.
- **Removing barriers to elected office.** Continue to implement outstanding Scottish Local Authority Remuneration Committee report recommendations and encourage a more diverse range of people, particularly more women, to stand for elected office.

As part of this we call for changes including legislative support to allow proxy voting in councils as soon as possible. Councils at the heart of discussions around the structure of local government. Structures are secondary to outcomes for our communities and we do not believe there is appetite for expensive and time-consuming structural reform within the next parliament. Any proposals for change must enhance representation and participation and be developed with communities. We must avoid a top-down approach and focus on new opportunities for further integration, collaboration and community empowerment.

# 3

## Our workforce



The local government workforce is essential. Council roles can be assisted by technology but most can never be automated: our services are human and depend on a diverse, skilled and committed workforce. A new Scottish Government must recognise and help promote local government as an employer of choice, supporting Councils to ensure our workforce is recognised, rewarded and developed for the future.

### We are calling for:

- **Funding for fair, multi-year pay settlements.** Multi-year, fair and flexible funding will enable us to advance fair pay, offer high-quality employment and achieve shared trade union goals to address low pay and workload. Being a 'Fair Work' employer and making local government an attractive career choice requires support from central government. Our predominantly female workforce will benefit from further development of flexible working practices.
- **An end to restrictive, centralised targets and 'input' measures with a renewed focus on improving outcomes.** Focusing on narrow measures (such as teacher numbers or delayed discharges) can limit the ability of local government to deliver services effectively for varied local needs and circumstances.

- **Training to address skills gaps, shortages and prepare our workforce for the future.** COSLA and a new Scottish Government must work together to offer opportunities for people to develop digital skills for the future; and to move into 'green jobs' as part of the just transition to net zero.
- **Joined-up workforce strategies to bolster our children's workforce and our social care workforce, across local government and the third sector.** To deliver on our shared commitments such as improving attainment and [Keeping the Promise](#) [Click Link], we need a diverse, collaborative workforce made up of a range of professionals and organisations for both adults and children.

Scottish Government must support a national recruitment campaign to bolster workforce numbers; implement and fund the recommendations of the [Fair Work Convention 2019 report on social care](#) [Click Link]; and, provide multi-year funding to create and retain jobs that are attractive and rewarding.

# 4



## Future generations: supporting our future generations to thrive in the modern world

Children’s rights should be embedded in policy making, following incorporation of [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) [Click Link]. It is a difficult time to be young with the rising cost of living, a changing employment market, and the impact of online life. Council services – including, but not limited to, schools – are vital to supporting children and young people to thrive.

### We are calling for:

- **A refreshed approach to early childhood development focused on joined up approaches across sectors and professions.** Supporting the whole family by increasing the accessibility of financial wellbeing advice, housing support and health services will improve outcomes. A fully funded, joint strategy on supporting speech and language development is required.
- **Nationalising the provision of high-quality secure care for children.** The current model relying on four independent providers is precarious, and availability of places is unreliable. Creating a national approach should also incorporate the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHS) inpatient and secure mental health provision.
- **Accelerating the pace and scale of delivery to keep The Promise.** We need agreement for how this will be achieved, resourced and sequenced. Local government cannot keep [The Promise](#) [Click Link] without a new Scottish Government and other public sector organisations playing their role.
- **A holistic approach to improving education.** Local government has a sharp focus on delivering improved outcomes: simply measuring inputs does not achieve change. We seek commitment to a partnership approach to ongoing reform, led by education leaders in local Government and informed by a wide range of partners, inc. children & young people.
- **A modernised approach to learning and development in a digital age.** This should enable children and young people to build the skills and study the courses they are interested in and need for their future.
- **Protecting young people online and challenging negative online discourse.** Children and young people must be protected from harm and supported to be more resilient in a digital world, for example by exploring the pros and cons of smart-phone use in schools. Stigmatising language reinforces generational cycles of deprivation, abuse and trauma.

# 5



## Thriving and cohesive communities: through effective public services

Councils support people to thrive at every stage of life, targeting support to tackle inequalities. We drive place-based, joined up, inclusive services for local communities. To achieve this and adapt to evolving challenges, the vital services we provide require further investment & support by the Scottish Government.

### We are calling for:

- **Developing cohesive communities.** Enabling Scotland to be welcoming, generous and courageous. We call for a strategic approach to community cohesion to be developed for Scotland with local government, Scottish Government and civil society.
- **Meaningful support to tackle poverty.** Work must progress at pace to develop a joint strategic approach to tackling poverty, shared by the UK, Scottish and local government which moves beyond pilots, rationalises the range of funding streams and embeds proportionate universalism in anti-poverty approaches.
- **A clear commitment to valuing social care by bolstering funding with an immediate injection of an additional £750m.** Commit to continued and strengthened integration of health and social care, ensuring more support that is high quality; personalised; offers choice and control; and reduces inequalities.
- **Support for mental health and wellbeing with a focus on:**
  - o Reducing drug deaths – through committing to investment in services that prevent people falling into crisis, recognising the unique and leading role that local authorities play.
  - o Suicide prevention – committing to increasing funding to grow the significant work already undertaken on suicide prevention in every local authority area in Scotland.
- **An end to violence against women and girls.** Move urgently to coherent, collective, and stable funding model, enabling high quality, accessible specialist services across Scotland for women, children and young people experiencing gender-based violence.
- **Meaningful recognition of the benefits of sport, culture and leisure.** Support to increase national and local investment in facilities and initiatives to support the health, wellbeing and education of our communities. Recognising the positive impact of local sport, leisure and cultural services.

# 6



## Thriving places: through sustainable economic growth

Councils can make places thrive, investing in public spaces, transport systems and local economies. The world is changing, and we must help communities thrive while we transition to a net zero economy. A place-based approach to policymaking is essential.

### We are calling for:

- **Full embedding of the Climate Delivery Framework** [\[Click Link\]](#). Councils and a new Scottish Government working together effectively can make a positive difference on climate change and help meet the next carbon budget. Together we must align resources against the biggest carbon challenges to help communities across Scotland.
- **An improved housing offer** Local government is committed to providing good quality affordable housing, reducing the social housing waiting list, and meeting our homelessness duties. That means a sustained commitment to building new affordable housing and a new Scottish Government must look again at levers held by them, local government and in some cases the UK Government.



**£5bn**  
COUNCILS  
HAVE SAVED  
SINCE 2011



**32-28%**  
COUNCILS'  
SHARE OF  
SCOTTISH  
BUDGET  
REDUCED



### A new Scottish Government must:

- o Provide multi-year funding to Local Government that truly reflects increasing costs and provides certainty.
  - o Work with COSLA to lobby UK Government to write-off the historic Housing Revenue Account debt to provide capacity for new supply.
  - o Increase housing supply through the development of new affordable homes, realising existing properties and streamlining planning processes.
  - o Devolve management of the Affordable Housing Supply Programme to councils, bringing more transparency whilst allowing greater flexibility to match spend to local need.
  - o Adjust land compensation rules, reducing land values for social and affordable housing and explore legislative powers to restrict the sale of housing in pressured areas for second and holiday homes.
  - o Invest in heat in buildings to help eliminate fuel poverty and reduce carbon emissions.
- **Increased investment in public transport.** We must connect communities with low carbon transport options. Capital investment at a national level is required to improve transport across the country and tackle remote, rural and island inequity, including connecting these areas to bolster Scotland's local and national economy. A review of the rural revenue funding allocation is required to reduce the current detriment to rural communities, as well as a legal requirement for rural impact assessment similar to that associated with policy in an islands context.
  - **Economic Development.** Councils work with local, regional and national partners to strengthen the economy and ensure local areas and populations benefit from inclusive economic growth. We are asking for a redistribution of funding from the new Scottish Government and the enterprise agencies to local government, to maximise the benefits that regional economies can realise, including additional investment in the [Business Gateway service](#) [\[Click Link\]](#)  
  
We must be supported and provided with further levers to drive Community Wealth Building.



## Conclusion

**For Scotland and its communities to thrive, grow and live well locally, our democracy must be healthy and local government is key. We can only achieve this through a working relationship between Scottish and local government that is mutually respectful and trusting.**

**We are making these asks of the new Scottish Government to ensure Scotland is the thriving, cohesive and welcoming place we all want it to be.**



**COSLA**



**COSLA**

**VERITY HOUSE | 19 HAYMARKET YARDS | EDINBURGH | EH12 5BH**

To learn more about our approach, our decision making,  
and our teams simply visit [www.cosla.gov.uk/about-cosla](http://www.cosla.gov.uk/about-cosla)

E: [info@cosla.gov.uk](mailto:info@cosla.gov.uk)

