Scottish Women's Budget Group

WHY PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM NEEDS TO TAKE A GENDERED APPROACH: A DISCUSSION PAPER



KEY MESSAGES

- **A gendered lens is critical if public service reform is to succeed and tackle inequality.**
- **Gender budgeting tools can support embedding the use of a gendered lens.**
- **Recognising and valuing the role of care, both paid and unpaid, is central to public service reform that works for women.**

1. INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Government has committed to reforming Scotland's public services with the aim of achieving four long-term outcomes: improving people's outcomes and experiences of services; improving community services; improving service delivery and financial sustainability; and developing the public sector workforce.

The public service reform (PSR) agenda provides an opportunity to address what is currently not working and to develop better, more responsive public services. Arguably, however, for PSR to be successful and achieve its intended outcomes, it is crucial that public bodies apply a gendered lens to the work undertaken as part of this agenda.

This paper discusses why applying a gendered analysis to PSR is crucial to achieving its intended long-term outcomes and explores what is required to make this happen.

2. CONTEXT

The reform of public services has, with varying degrees of prominence and success, been a central part of Scotland's policy agenda for the past 15 years. Following the deterioration in public finances in the wake of the 2007 financial and economic crisis, the need to ease pressure on public services led to the establishment of the Christie Commission[1], which examined the future delivery of public services.

There remains broad consensus around the principles set out by the Christie Commission, and some of the Commission's recommendations have been implemented. However, new financial challenges and increasing pressure on public services, exacerbated by the impact of Covid-19, have renewed the focus on PSR.

[1] Christie, C. (2011) **Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services**

The extent of Scotland's financial pressures was clearly articulated by the Scottish Fiscal Commission in March 2023[2], which warned that "under current Scottish and UK fiscal policies, if public services in Scotland are to continue to be delivered as they are today, Scottish Government spending over the next 50 years will exceed the estimated funding available by an average of 1.7 per cent each year".

Against this financial backdrop, public service reform has been formally back on the policy agenda in Scotland since May 2024[3]. In June 2025, the Scottish Government published *Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland*[4], which set out its "commitments to change the system of public services – to be preventative, to better join up and to be efficient – in order to better deliver for people".

The Scottish Government's *Programme for Government 2026–2031*[5] offers the latest and most ambitious update on the plans for PSR. Of particular significance are announcements on empowering regions and communities, which open the door to changes in local governance; delivering social care reform; and making early progress in healthcare.

These announcements have the potential to bring about significant change if implemented effectively. However, the ability to deliver the intended outcomes risks being undermined by the failure to consider gender equality systematically across the actions and policy documents underpinning the reform agenda.

3. WHY WE NEED TO EXAMINE PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM THROUGH A GENDER LENS

At the most basic level, women are more likely to rely on public services and to work in the public sector. As a result, changes to public services have the potential to disproportionately affect women. However, the gender implications of PSR go beyond its direct impact on women as service users and public sector workers. They also relate to what is valued and prioritised within public service delivery. This can be seen in two policy areas of social care and violence against women and girls (VAWG).

In relation to social care reform, the Programme for Government states that the aim is to reach an agreement "which makes best use of the funding in the system, delivers fairer and more efficient services and achieves economies of scale, while maintaining a focus on community need".

Given the gendered nature of care, the current proposals do not appear to offer sufficient guarantees that social care reform will deliver better outcomes for women. This would include improving working conditions in a predominantly female workforce and addressing the gaps in social care provision that unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, must navigate. Ultimately, this raises a broader question: to what extent can the Scottish Government achieve its longer-term objectives for PSR – particularly those of improving people's outcomes and experiences of services and strengthening community services – without a more ambitious and explicitly gender-informed approach?

VAWG is another crucial yet often overlooked area in PSR where a gender budget approach is essential to achieving intended outcomes.

In the foreword to the Programme for Government, the First Minister highlights the interlinks between gender inequality and VAWG: "We cannot eradicate violence against women and girls (VAWG) without addressing women's inequality, so our work to tackle poverty and the cost-of-living crisis, to increase economic opportunities, and to advance public service reform are all critical to tackling violence against women and girls."

[2] Scottish Fiscal Commission (2023) **Fiscal Sustainability Report**
[3] Scottish Government (2024) **Priorities for Scotland: First Minister's statement – 22 May 2024**
[4] Scottish Government (2025) **Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland**
[5] Scottish Government (2026) **Programme for Government 2026 – 2030**

This statement recognises, through a gendered lens, that VAWG is rooted in existing gender inequalities in our society. However, in light of the proposed restructuring of local government in Scotland, failing to apply a gendered lens and consider how these reforms could affect the delivery of specialist VAWG services could have disastrous consequences. The complex funding landscape and the variety of approaches taken at local level to procurement could negatively impact on an already fragile sector, potentially undermining the Government's ability to achieve its mission to tackle violence against women and girls.

While these examples focus on highly gendered areas of service delivery, the application of gender budget analysis is needed across all policy areas. Digitalisation is regularly highlighted as an important part of the PSR process. However, what this means for how people engage with public services, potential increased levels of unpaid care or care-related administration and the gender implications of this, needs to be considered so that any potential negative impacts can be mitigated. Gendered analysis seeks to ensure that unpaid care, and in turn women, are visible in the decision-making process.

4. HOW TO TAKE A GENDER LENS TO PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

To ensure that PSR is gender-informed, gender budget analysis must be placed at its core, and must inform actions throughout the reform process. This would help identify potential gendered impacts linked to the design and delivery of public services at an early stage. It would avoid treating women as an afterthought or addressing gender equality only once decisions have already been made. Gender budget analysis can also help identify priorities and assess different approaches, making it possible to understand who benefits from (and who bears the costs of) reform.

Embedding gender analysis in public sector reform means policy makers – officials and politicians – asking the following questions:

- **What outcomes are we trying to achieve and how will the proposed changes help achieve these?**
- **Is it clear how equality information has been used to inform the proposals?**
- **Is there enough information included in proposals to show that any stated savings or increased income are realistic?**
- **How are unpaid care roles considered and supported in the proposals?**
- **How are people with lived and learned experience in the area being engaged in the process?**
- **Have we considered what impact the proposed changes will have on other policy/service areas?**
- **Are the assumptions that are informing the assessment made clear? Have these been tested to ensure they are correct?**
- **How will we know if the changes are successful (what data will we collect)?**

The **SWBG gender budgeting toolkit** is an important resource for policy makers. It provides information about the principles and tools to support gender analysis of policy and budget setting processes.

PSR should ensure that public services are built around people and communities, that prevention is prioritised, and that services aim to reduce inequalities and promote equality. These were among the objectives envisioned by the Christie Commission and should shape proposals going forward.



5. THE RISKS OF NOT APPLYING A GENDER LENS TO PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

A gendered analysis of past interventions exposes the gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes. For example, the introduction of Integration Joint Boards (IJBs) for health and social care was one of the flagship PSR initiatives following the recommendations of the Christie Commission. However, evidence indicates that genuine integration remains far from being realised and that this is having a negative impact on those who need care and those who care.

SWBG's recent review of local authority and IJB budgets found that Chief Social Workers had raised concerns about the impact of proposed savings on frontline staff, who are having to manage increasing demand alongside reductions in the hours available for care packages.

Chief Social Workers also highlighted the likelihood of longer waiting times, reduced access to non-critical support, and increased pressure on unpaid carers[6].

This raises questions about whether the current approach to health and social care integration (designed without a gendered lens) is delivering its originally stated outcomes. For example, are people working in health and social care services sufficiently engaged and supported to continuously improve the information, support, care and treatment they provide? Are people using services having positive experiences and is their dignity being respected?

Based on the example presented above, it is difficult to see how the Government can expect to achieve its ambitions of improving people's outcomes and experiences of services, or ensuring that service providers work together in a cost-effective, efficient and preventative way, with a focus on learning and improvement, without a more systematic consideration of gender inequality in policy and budgetary decisions.

6. CONCLUSION

PSR provides an opportunity to address what is not working within Scotland's public services, from their design and budgeting to their delivery. At the very least, PSR should achieve the long-term outcomes set out by the Scottish Government. Ideally, however, the ambition should be to uphold the principles of the Christie Commission, particularly those of building public services around people and communities, prioritising prevention, and ensuring that services reduce inequalities and promote equality. In either scenario, applying a gendered lens will be essential to ensuring outcomes are realised and principles are upheld.

Building capacity at national, regional and local levels, across all policy areas, through training on the use of gender budgeting tools is crucial to making this approach successful, with genuine participation in the design of public service being a vital component of a gender budgeting approach. Overall, applying a gendered lens to policy-making in general and PSR in particular means challenging established viewpoints and ways of working by considering issues such as care that have so far remained largely invisible in policy, and examining how gender inequalities interact with budgets, policy decisions and the design of public services.

The Scottish Government has demonstrated the scale of its ambitions for PSR in its Programme for Government. Further, Cabinet Secretary Ivan McKee described PSR as the defining task of this parliamentary session. The measures announced so far reflect the scale of this ambition, with proposed reforms to social care and local government, alongside changes to the structure of NHS territorial Health Boards. Such measures represent significant structural changes with the potential to profoundly affect people's lives. Furthermore, the Programme for Government recognises deeply entrenched gender inequalities, including those represented by VAWG. Embedding gender equality at the heart of the PSR agenda is therefore imperative to ensuring that the proposed reforms achieve their intended outcomes and deliver the transformative shift the Government is seeking.

[6] SWBG (2026) Local Authority Review 2026/27

ABOUT US

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) is a charity that promotes women's equality. We do this by helping people understand how budgets and economic policy can tackle inequality. SWBG brings together a wide range of women from across Scotland who have an interest in women's equality and want to achieve better gender equality in our society. We have focused on encouraging active gender analysis in the Scottish Budget process since 2000.

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