

Local Government Benchmarking Overview Report 2023-24

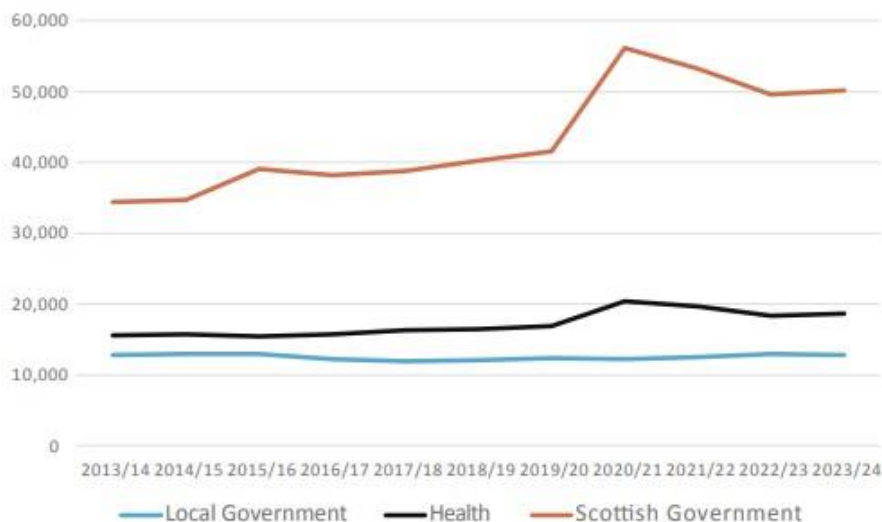
Introduction

The Benchmarking Report looks at the performance of a range of council services. It is compiled by the Improvement Service for CoSLA. It is an annual exercise giving details about the last year (2023-24) but also making comparisons over time, this is the 13th report. The verdict on council funding is blunt "Council finances are under immense stress...Questions about the need for a major policy shift in how councils are funded and what they are required to do need to be answered". The impact of inadequate funding and increasing demand has made itself felt both on services and staff.

Council funding by Scottish Government

While the Scottish Government budget has increased by 45% since 2013/14, the local government budget has remained relatively static. Funding of local government has not kept pace with other parts of the Scottish budget for many years. While the budget for Health has grown by 20% since 2013/14, the budget for local government has fallen by 0.9% in real terms in that period.(see fig.1)

Figure1: Change over time in Scottish Government, Health and Local Government Revenue Budgets



Source: Scottish Government budget documents (spring revision) for 2014/15 to 2023/24 and actual figures for 2013/14 (from local government finance circular) as budget documents were not available

Where there have been uplifts in Scottish Government funding for local government in the last decade, almost all of this has been to fund new services

KEY POINTS:

- This is an examination of local government performance over a wide range of services.
- There are staff shortages across a range of services.
- Councils are struggling both to retain long serving staff and recruit younger workers.
- Councils are shifting away from local decision making to delivering on national priorities.

Losing local capacity

Longer term trends show a shift towards national priorities. towards national priorities and those areas where Scottish Government have allocated additional monies for specific purposes. Eg social care, education, and support for care experienced children , growing since 2010/11 by 29%, 19% and 18% respectively. As these areas account for a large share of the budget, councils are left with little flexibility but to target increased and disproportionate savings on those areas which are not protected by Scottish Government policies.

The impact on many services has been severe. Since 2010/11, budget reductions have included:

- 26% reduction in culture and leisure spending
- 13% reduction in roads spending
- 25% reduction in planning spending
- 30% reduction in tourism spending
- 23% reduction in corporate support services spending
- 30% reduction in trading standards and environmental health spending
- 39% reduction in street cleaning spending
- 11% reduction in waste service spending.

Staffing Issues

The report concludes that “Staff shortages are still being felt to varying degrees across all council services” With (again!) difficulties most acute in social care and social work with over 90% of councils reporting shortages. Staff shortages in other areas are becoming more prevalent, with councils now facing gaps in areas not previously impacted. The cost-of-living crisis is said to have exacerbated the workforce crisis; increasing demand for services and therefore pressures on staff. This has led to, in some councils and some areas, an increase in use of agency staff and as a result higher costs.

Sickness absence is at record levels.

The LG workforce is ageing and councils are seeing people retiring earlier. This is described as a “particular challenge” with senior management and leadership positions, where there continues to be a significant turn-over in the most senior positions within councils. It’s stated that there needs to be a focus on how retention of staff at this level can be improved.

Councils are also struggling to attract a younger workers “into roles and professions at all levels” Making local government an attractive place to work for younger people is “critical for future workforce planning”

The cost-of-living crisis has further exacerbated the workforce crisis, increasing demand for council services particularly by the most vulnerable in society, just as staff are choosing to leave local government for better paid jobs in other sectors to cope with rising inflation.

The report points to a decline (“a modal shift in beliefs”) about a local government workforce who are motivated to pursue a vocation in public service. With the result that the option of similar pay in a less demanding and less stressful work environment sees people choosing to move into other sectors. This means that local government is coming under increasing pressure from pay competition in other sectors and recruitment and retention of staff is increasingly difficult.

Where now?

This report shows “the impact of deepening fiscal, workforce and demand pressures on local government” services and the communities they serve. In terms of making things better report puts an emphasis on the Scottish Local Government Assurance and Improvement Framework (SLGAIF) and the SOLACE / Improvement Service “transformation programme”. They say though that “in the short-term, to focus more on prioritising and maintaining performance, rather than service improvement.”

Additional reading

- [Benchmarking Framework Report](#)
- [Improvement centre- Solace transformation programme](#)



Contact UNISON's Bargaining & Campaigns team:

Stephen Low
s.low2@unison.co.uk

Susan Galloway
s.galloway@unison.co.uk

Nicola Morris
N.Morris@unison.co.uk

0141 342 2811
0800 0 857 857