Voluntary Sector Gateway West Lothian (VSGWL)

Response to the Scottish Government Public Service Reform Consultation

Introduction

Voluntary Sector Gateway West Lothian (VSGWL) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's proposals for Public Service Reform. As the Third Sector Interface for West Lothian, VSGWL supports, develops and represents a diverse network of charities, community groups, social enterprises and volunteers who are at the forefront of addressing poverty, inequality, social isolation, poor health outcomes and community disadvantage.

We strongly support the ambition to create public services that are preventative, person-centred, collaborative and sustainable. However, meaningful reform will require a fundamental shift in how communities, public bodies and third sector organisations work together. The third sector must be recognised not simply as a delivery partner, but as an equal partner in the design, implementation and evaluation of public service reform.

Our response is informed by ongoing engagement with voluntary and community organisations across West Lothian, many of whom are experiencing increasing demand for support against a backdrop of rising costs, workforce pressures and continued funding uncertainty.

The Role of the Third Sector in Public Service Reform

The third sector has a unique ability to engage people who are often least likely to access statutory services. Local organisations understand the communities they serve, can respond flexibly to emerging needs and frequently provide support at an earlier stage than public services are able to.

Across West Lothian, voluntary organisations play a critical role in:

- Supporting individuals experiencing poverty and financial hardship.
- Improving mental health and wellbeing.
- Tackling social isolation and loneliness.
- Supporting employability and skills development.
- Assisting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions.
- Delivery of support to unpaid carers.
- Promoting community participation and empowerment.

- Delivering volunteering opportunities that strengthen civic engagement.

These contributions reduce pressure on statutory services and demonstrate the value of investing in prevention and early intervention. For example, support for an unpaid carer population of 25,000+ people, by third sector organisations across our region, has tangible impacts on home-first living. This unpaid carer population, with support delivered to carers from the age of 3, has an economic value to West Lothian of more than £571 million per annum.

Prevention Must Become the Primary Principle

VSGWL strongly supports a greater focus on prevention. Too often, resources are directed towards responding to crises rather than addressing underlying causes of disadvantage.

Preventative approaches delivered through community-based organisations can:

- Improve health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Reduce demand on acute health and social care services.
- Increase employability and financial resilience.
- Strengthen community connections and reduce isolation.
- Support people to remain independent for longer.

We believe the Scottish Government should establish clear expectations that public bodies prioritise preventative investment and demonstrate how spending decisions contribute to reducing future demand on services.

Recommendation 1

Introduce a national commitment to preventative spending across public services, supported by clear outcome measures and accountability mechanisms.

Community Participation and Co-Production

Successful reform cannot be achieved without meaningful participation from communities. Too often, consultation exercises occur after key decisions have already been made.

Communities and third sector organisations should be involved from the outset in identifying challenges, designing solutions and evaluating impact.

Co-production requires:

- Early and meaningful engagement.

- Investment in participation.
- Accessible decision-making processes.
- Recognition of lived experience.
- Equity of influence between sectors.

Recommendation 2

Require public bodies to demonstrate how communities and the third sector have been involved in the co-design of services and reform programmes.

Sustainable Funding Is Essential

The ability of the third sector to contribute to reform is undermined by short-term and fragmented funding arrangements.

Many organisations continue to operate with one-year funding cycles that make long-term planning, workforce development and service sustainability extremely difficult. Public service reform cannot be achieved while organisations delivering preventative services face ongoing financial instability.

VSGWL believes sustainable funding should become a central pillar of reform.

Recommendation 3

The Scottish Government should promote:

- Multi-year funding agreements of at least three years wherever possible.
- Full-cost recovery as standard practice.
- Simplified application and reporting processes.
- Greater alignment between commissioning and preventative outcomes.

Sustainable public service reform will not be achieved while significant parts of the third sector continue to operate through short-term funding arrangements. Multi-year funding, full-cost recovery and proportionate reporting should become standard practice across public sector funding and commissioning programmes.

Partnership Working and System Reform

Effective public service reform requires stronger collaboration between local government, the NHS, the third sector, communities and other partners.

The third sector is often engaged after decisions have been made rather than being involved as an equal strategic partner. This limits opportunities to develop integrated solutions and fully utilise community assets.

Recommendation 4

Strengthen expectations for third sector involvement within Community Planning Partnerships, Health and Social Care Partnerships and other strategic decision-making structures.

Recommendation 5

Recognise the third sector as a strategic partner in public service reform and ensure its representation within national and local reform governance arrangements.

Tackling Inequalities

Reform must be driven by a clear commitment to reducing inequalities.

Voluntary organisations are often the first to identify emerging challenges affecting disadvantaged communities. Their experience provides valuable insight into the barriers faced by people experiencing poverty, discrimination, disability, poor health and social exclusion.

Public services should be designed around those who experience the poorest outcomes, rather than around organisational structures.

Recommendation 6

Require all reform initiatives to demonstrate how they will contribute to reducing socioeconomic, health and geographic inequalities.

Digital Transformation

Digital innovation presents significant opportunities to improve access to services and increase efficiency. However, reform must recognise that many individuals and communities continue to experience digital exclusion.

Digital transformation should complement, rather than replace, person-centred approaches.

Recommendation 7

Ensure that digital transformation programmes include investment in digital inclusion, community support and alternative routes for accessing services.

Investing in Third Sector Infrastructure

Strong communities require strong infrastructure.

As the Third Sector Interface for West Lothian, VSGWL supports volunteering, organisational development, community engagement, partnership working and capacity building across the local voluntary sector. These functions are essential for

connecting communities with public services and supporting collaborative approaches.

If the ambitions of public service reform are to be realised, local infrastructure organisations must be adequately resourced to facilitate engagement, participation and partnership working.

Recommendation 8

Provide sustained investment in Third Sector Interfaces and other local infrastructure organisations that enable collaboration, volunteering, community participation and organisational resilience.

Conclusion

VSGWL supports the Scottish Government's commitment to reforming public services. However, meaningful and lasting change will require more than structural reform. It requires a genuine shift in relationships, power and investment.

The third sector is uniquely placed to connect public services with communities, identify emerging needs and deliver preventative support. Communities and the organisations that support them should be recognised not simply as stakeholders to be consulted, but as partners in designing and delivering solutions.

Public service reform presents an opportunity to build a more preventative, collaborative and equitable system. To achieve this, the Scottish Government must place communities and the third sector at the heart of its reform programme and provide the long-term investment necessary to support that ambition.

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