

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee  
Tuesday 17 September 2024  
24th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

## Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee (SLARC)

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide information to inform the Committee's evidence taking on the Scottish Government's response to the [Scottish Local Authority Remuneration Committee \(SLARC\)'s recommendations on councillor remuneration](#).
2. The Committee has been closely monitoring progress with SLARC as part of its wider work on [understanding barriers to participation in local politics](#). It previously considered SLARC's recommendations in [evidence with COSLA and SLARC on 28 May](#) although the Scottish Government had yet to respond to them at that point.
3. The Scottish Government has since published its response and the Committee will take evidence at today's meeting on the response and related correspondence from the following witnesses—

**Panel One:** Angela Leitch CBE (former chair of SLARC)  
Martin McElroy (former member of SLARC)  
David Heaney (former member of SLARC)  
Jane O'Donnell, Chief Executive, COSLA

**Panel Two:** Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government  
Fiona Campbell, Local Government Strategy Manager, Scottish Government

### Correspondence

4. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government [wrote to the Committee](#) on 5 July to confirm that the Scottish Government had published [its response to the recommendations](#).
5. The letter confirms that the Scottish Government is "content to accept SLARC's recommendations on salary levels and banding related changes and will introduce regulations early in 2025 to bring these into effect from 1 April 2025." The Cabinet Secretary has also "accepted in principle or in part some recommendations, such as those on expenses or around public statements."
6. However, the Scottish Government response states that "local authorities are responsible for paying Councillor salaries from their annual budgets and the costs of increasing the number of senior councillors would need to be met from within existing allocations."

7. Conversely, COSLA's [response to the recommendations](#) (provided in May) stated that—

“In line with the Verity House Agreement and the principles laid out in the European Charter for Local Self Governance, funding of local government needs to be sustainable. The SLARC report highlights the cost of democracy a sentiment echoed by COSLA leaders. To attract and retain a diverse and representative group of elected members, councillor's terms and conditions need to be addressed. Leaving the cost of recommendations to local government budgets would result in limited implementation of recommendations and an unacceptable pitting of front-line services against the cost of democracy.”

8. The Chair of SLARC, Angela Leitch CBE, also wrote to the Cabinet Secretary on 14 August (attached **at Annexe A**). Whilst the letter “welcomes the Scottish Government’s endorsement of our report and the acknowledgement of the changes that need to be made to strengthen local democracy in Scotland” it also states that SLARC—

“...was disappointed to learn that the Scottish Government’s response to the remuneration element of our report was that local government had to find the necessary finances from their existing budgets if they believed it appropriate to implement any increases in remuneration to local councillors. The Committee worked on the understanding that its recommendations would form part of the local government settlement and not solely require decisions of individual local councils themselves to determine whether or not to adopt the recommendations aimed at improving wider local representation.”

9. The letter also highlights concerns that “the Scottish Government’s decision to pass responsibility for financing the recommendations in our report is not in the spirit of the remit we were given and risks a repeat of the previous SLARC report (2011) resulting in little change to those who are able to stand for these important public service roles.”

10. COSLA then wrote to the Scottish Government on 23 August (attached **at Annexe B**) stating that “we find your position, that the costs of the recommendations are for Local Government, very disappointing. We view this as inconsistent with the April 2023 commitment and a setback for tackling barriers to elected office in Scotland.”

11. COSLA therefore asked the Scottish Government “to reconsider the decision that funding of recommendations should come from Local Authorities” instead suggesting that “an open and honest dialogue in line with the Verity House Agreement at both political and officer level to enable a fully funded 2024 implementation” should take place.

## Conclusion

12. The Committee is invited to consider the above information in its evidence sessions with SLARC, COSLA and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government with a view to informing its future scrutiny of related regulations.

**Clerks to the Committee  
September 2024**

**ANNEXE A: Letter from former SLARC Chair to Cabinet Secretary, 13 August 2024**

Dear Ms Robison,

As the recent convenor of the Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee, I was advised of the Scottish Government's response to the Committee's recommendations on Monday 8 July 2024 following the publication of the Ministerial response on 5 July 2024.

As the former DFM you will be aware, that the Committee was stood down on 31 May 2024 having fulfilled its remit, but Committee members and I have remained in contact to consider the Scottish Government's response to our report, and the points in this letter reflect the unanimous views of the entire committee.

Firstly, we very much welcome the Scottish Government's endorsement of our report and the acknowledgement of the changes that need to be made to strengthen local democracy in Scotland. A strong local government closely aligned to local communities can best serve the needs of diverse populations.

In making its recommendations, the Committee gave full consideration to the evidence we gathered. It is our view that these recommendations would enable greater diversity amongst those standing for elected office which is why they are all encompassing.

There are a number of points that the members of the Committee would like to draw to your attention, and we will offer the same observations to the Presidential Team in COSLA.

Firstly, in the Committee's reading of the Scottish Government's response, it is suggested that we were late in producing our recommendations. The Committee was constituted in April 2023, rather than January 2023, as set out in the Public Appointment documentation. We recognised the challenge of having three months less to produce our recommendations and worked diligently and at pace to fulfil our remit. It should also be acknowledged that the Committee completed its task with only six members rather than seven as was the original intention but was never fulfilled.

Scottish Government officials will confirm that the Committee was initially advised by them that it had until January 2024 to submit our proposals to them. The Committee worked on the basis that any changes to statutory instruments could be incorporated by Scottish Government legal teams to ensure implementation in April 2024 as long as the Committee's recommendations were received by January 2024. We were then advised in December 2023, just as our final report was nearing completion that this was no longer the case and that there was insufficient time to prepare the necessary statutory instrument that would enable our proposals to be

incorporated into the Scottish Government's public service spending plans in 2024/25.

As a result of this change in advice from civil servants, the Committee took the opportunity to refine the report and shared it with colleagues in Scottish Government over the course of January this year. It was the Committee's view that given the ongoing in-year adjustments to local government funding, there remained scope for our proposed remuneration changes to be put into effect at some point in 2024/25 should our recommendations be accepted.

Throughout its life cycle, the Committee regularly reminded itself of the remit we were asked to fulfil and we were at pains to address the following four points set out by Scottish Ministers.

Recommendations from SLARC should:

- "Establish whether the role of a modern-day ordinary councillor is full time or part-time and what the commensurate pay for that work should be.
- seek to ensure that remuneration does not act as a barrier to encouraging people to stand for elected office.
- encourage a wider and more diverse range of people with varied lived experience from across our communities to stand for elected office; and
- be affordable on an ongoing basis."

During the summer of 2023 we undertook extensive engagement with Scottish councils, both elected members and chief officers. We were determined to understand the responsibilities and time commitments of being a councillor and also undertook analysis of payments made elsewhere to non-executives and politicians in Scotland as a benchmark exercise. Our engagement work involved conducting a comprehensive on-line survey of all councillors, a survey of councils' governance arrangements and around 40 face- to-face discussions with a representative sample of Scottish councils.

Given our analysis, we produced robust evidence of the value of the role of councillors in our democratic process and the importance of diverse local representation.

In light of our work being commissioned by the Scottish Government and having a national focus, the Committee was disappointed to learn that the Scottish Government's response to the remuneration element of our report was that local government had to find the necessary finances from their existing budgets if they believed it appropriate to implement any increases in remuneration to local councillors.

The Committee worked on the understanding that its recommendations would form part of the local government settlement and not solely require decisions of individual local councils themselves to determine whether or not to adopt the recommendations aimed at improving wider local representation. Indeed, our discussions with Scottish Government officials around the timescales required to produce the necessary statutory instrument were predicated upon the assumption that this would be required to enable funding arising from the Committee's recommendations to be included within the Scottish Government's budget process, and not the responsibility of local councils.

In a joint statement<sup>1</sup>, published in February 2022, the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) recognised,

“... the need for a review of Councillor pay to ensure that terms and conditions truly reflect the responsibilities of a modern-day Councillor, and that remuneration does not act as a barrier to encouraging a diverse range of people to stand for elected office”.

We consider that the Scottish Government's decision to pass responsibility for financing the recommendations in our report is not in the spirit of the remit we were given and risks a repeat of the previous SLARC report (2011) resulting in little change to those who are able to stand for these important public service roles. In effect, it is likely that those standing for election at a local level will continue to be predominately over 50, male and have additional sources of income.

As we point out in the report, local government is rightly subject to intense public scrutiny and at a time when critical services are being reduced due to increased demand and diminishing resources, even awarding further administrative support to enable local councillors to more effectively undertake their duties is not something any council we spoke with was willing to do.

Therefore, the Committee recognises the impossible position in which local authorities now find themselves. We have also observed that this response does not seem to be in the spirit of the Verity House Agreement.

Our report contains a detailed section on the affordability of the recommendations. On an annual basis this amounts to £5.1million or 0.04% of the allocated budget to local government in Scotland. The last review of the complexity of the roles of local councillors was undertaken over a decade ago. Its recommendations were not accepted or implemented and given the changes to the role since then that have been evidenced in our report, the Committee considers this proposal to be a modest increase but one that

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<sup>1</sup> “Statement from the Scottish Government and COSLA: increasing the diversity of local councillors”, 18 February 2022.

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would encourage a more diverse and representative cross-section of citizens to come forward to stand for elected office and oversee the delivery level of public service.

As I point out earlier in this letter, the Committee is no longer in existence. Nevertheless, given the work that was undertaken I would be pleased to meet with you to expand on some of the points above and other aspects of the Government's response which passes responsibility for action to local government, apparently failing to recognise the significant and overt commitment that is needed at a national level.

Yours sincerely

Angela Leitch CBE

(Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee Convener, April 2023 – May 2024)

**ANNEXE B: Letter from COSLA to Cabinet Secretary**

**From COSLA Political Group Leaders and COSLA Presidential Team  
23 August 2024**

Dear Shona,

We are writing to you following your response to the SLARC report published on the 5 July 2024.

We welcome your acceptance of most recommendations set out in the SLARC report and wish to continue the close partnership working on councillor terms and conditions to ensure that everyone in Scotland can run for public office should they wish to do so.

Acknowledging that SLARC was re-established as part of our joint commitment in April 2023 to tackle the barriers to elected office and to ensure that “terms and conditions truly reflect the responsibilities of a modern-day councillor”, we find your position, that the costs of the recommendations are for Local Government, very disappointing. We view this as inconsistent with the April 2023 commitment and a setback for tackling barriers to elected office in Scotland.

As you will know Leaders responded to the SLARC report in February 2024, accepting all recommendations in full. Appreciating that there have been several events and further work undertaken, we still find the delay in your response unhelpful regarding implementation of recommendations. Additionally, the timing of the response and related messaging has contributed to conflation between the SLARC recommendations and ongoing pay negotiations for our workforce, which is adding to a negative perception of the councillor role. It is also noted that a response was not provided within the lifespan of SLARC and therefore Committee members are no longer available to assist in implementation.

We are fully aware of the current financial environment which impacts both spheres of government. Affordability was, appropriately, a detailed section of the SLARC report and a key focus for the Committee. The report is not proposing a pay raise for councillors, as this has its own recognised process established in 2017 based on ASHE data. Instead, the re-establishment of SLARC was a joint venture aimed to provide a one-off job evaluation style reassessment of the councillor role with no pre agreed funding model. This is similar to the Moorhead report in the Republic of Ireland, or ongoing review by Maynard Mawhinney in Northern Ireland. The remit of SLARC asked if the role of a councillor has changed, to which the Committee provided a wealth of evidence demonstrating the added complexities in 2024, including expectations around partnership working, increased role in scrutiny and challenge and responsibilities around strategic input. The last report by SLARC was published in 2011 and resulted in very limited implementation.

If the Scottish Government maintains its current position, the same result is likely. Namely, councillors remain on average over 55, male, non-disabled and in receipt of another form of income. Scotland could lead the UK in terms of Local Government diversity, but only if we take steps to tackle the barriers to election and retention.

We are aware that the former convenor of SLARC, Angela Leitch, wrote to you on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2024 with similar concerns. We echo her calls for a meeting to discuss this in more detail.

Given the shared commitment to this work and ongoing budget constraints across the public sector, we ask Scottish Government to reconsider the decision that funding of recommendations should come from Local Authorities. Instead, we propose an open and honest dialogue in line with the Verity House Agreement at both political and officer level to enable a fully funded 2024 implementation.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Shona Morrison, Cllr Steven Heddle, Cllr Paul Steele, Cllr Euan Jardine,  
Cllr Peter Barrett, Cllr Jon Molyneux, Cllr Douglas Reid, Cllr David Ross