

*The 'go to' organisation for Local
Government improvement in Scotland*

is
improvement **service**

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Human Rights Capability Building Project



Elected Members Briefing Series

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes are directly produced by IS staff but we also make available material from a wide range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. [All briefing notes](#) in the series can be accessed on the IS website.

About the Improvement Service

The Improvement Service (IS) is the go-to organisation for local government improvement in Scotland. Established in 2005, the IS supports councils and their partners to deliver better outcomes for communities, reduce inequalities, and achieve efficiencies.

We do this through leading transformation, building capacity and capability for improvement across the sector, supporting collaboration to tackle shared challenges, providing data and intelligence to inform policy and decision-making, and delivering national shared service applications and technology platforms.

Our expertise covers a wide range of areas including digital public services, performance measurement and benchmarking, transformation and change management, workforce and skills development, planning and place-based approaches, economy and employability, poverty and inequalities, and climate change.

For more information, visit our website: www.improvementservice.org.uk

About this briefing note

This briefing note provides an update and information on a new Improvement Service (IS) project focused on building the capability of local authorities on human rights. This aims to include engagement with elected members, leadership teams, and those working throughout local authorities. For more information see our [webpage](#).

The project will currently run from July 2025 to March 2026 and while focused on building the capability of local authorities on human rights generally, it comes within the context of the Scottish Government's proposed Human Rights Bill which intends to establish new human rights duties for public bodies.

Alongside the project at the IS, NHS Education for Scotland are also building a project focused on capability building across Scotland's health boards.

We are seeking to engage with interested elected members across Scotland with the project currently going to establish and offer an elected member briefing session. This could be for each interested council or for elected members across different councils depending upon interest. The session would provide an opportunity to engage with an expert in international human rights law and practice and begin to build human rights considerations into everyday decision-making. **Please speak to your officers if this is of interest and ask them to contact aidan.flegg@improvementservice.org.uk to arrange.**



What is the issue and why does it matter?

International human rights are universal entitlements for every human being, encompassing a broad spectrum of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. These fundamental rights include, for example, the right to life and liberty, family life and privacy, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to housing, health, and education, and to participate in public affairs. They are protected by international treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and are voluntarily agreed to by countries. Once in effect, these rights are to be respected, protected, and fulfilled for all without discrimination.

In practice, this means that human rights are relevant to the public sector as a whole. Local authorities are on the frontlines of defending and delivering human rights, from safe and affordable housing to education and recreational spaces, healthcare, decent work, community engagement, and the protection of minorities. The decisions taken at the local level can therefore impact greatly upon people's enjoyment of their human rights. While many people in Scotland enjoy their human rights and live a life with dignity, there are still many people throughout our communities who do not. For example, there remains people throughout Scotland living in absolute and relative poverty unable to claim their basic economic, social and cultural rights.

The Scottish Government has set out an intention to become a world leader in human rights and has taken steps to provide more human rights protection through passing legislation on children's rights and proposing to pass more focused on economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, as well as human rights for women, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. The aim is for Scotland's laws to reflect the standards of international human rights law.

This presents both challenges and opportunities for Scotland's local authorities, and the IS's capability building project aims to enable the opportunities for local government to become leaders in human rights practice.



What does this mean for elected members?

The engagement of elected members on human rights issues throughout Scotland will be critical to promoting and protecting everyone's fundamental human rights. Through close engagement with communities on the issues that matter most to them, working with partner organisations, setting the budget, and scrutinising the use of resources, elected members can make a real difference to people's lives.

Currently, the project is seeking engagement from elected members to discuss their roles and human rights including any current practices, views, and begin to look at building human rights into the everyday decision-making of local authorities.

Engaging with the project offers elected members the opportunity to work with an expert in international human rights law and practice and begin to build human rights considerations into their everyday decision-making. This, in turn, can demonstrate a clear commitment to and leadership in delivering upon community's human rights.

We are seeking to engage with interested elected members across Scotland with the project currently going to establish and offer an elected member briefing session for each council. The session would provide an opportunity to engage with an expert in international human rights law and practice and begin to build human rights considerations into everyday decision-making. **Please speak to your officers if this is of interest and ask them to contact aidan.flegg@improvementservice.org.uk to arrange.**



What does good practice look like in this area?

Human rights work in local government is an area receiving increasing attention from the international human rights community with numerous UN institutions and organisations now focused on developing practices for local government to adopt. Many local/city governments globally are now using human rights as an approach to demonstrate their commitment to upholding human rights for their communities.

Delivering people's basic human rights can be achieved in many ways and how best to do this will be dependent upon the situation of each local authority. However, numerous approaches are relevant to all local authorities and elected members can embed human rights as they carry out their roles and responsibilities. For example:

Demonstrating commitment and leadership (championing human rights)

- Setting formal council policy or charter committing to human rights.
- Elected members and senior leaders actively champion rights in public statements and actions.
- Human rights objectives are embedded in corporate/strategic plans.
- Identifying clear human rights violations within local communities.
- Annual reviews and scrutiny of human rights progress across the year.

Embedding human rights in decision-making

- Human rights impact assessments completed for all major decisions and policies and are used to actively change policy where required.
- Use of public consultations that are inclusive, accessible, and provide meaningful opportunities for engagement with local council policies and decision-making.
- Equality and human rights considerations integrated into procurement of services.

Ensuring accessibility and non-discrimination

- Services being adapted for different needs (i.e., disabilities, languages, culture).
- Targeted actions to reduce discrimination in housing, health and policing.
- Engagement with society's most marginalised and disadvantaged.

Establishing transparency and accountability

- Effective and human rights-based scrutiny of decision-making.
- Creation of easy-to-use complaints mechanisms and supporting of communities to challenge decisions affecting them.

Empowering communities

- Helping communities to understand and influence decision-making.
- Establishing citizens boards and panels that are reflective of the community and include those often marginalised.
- Creating public campaigns to raise awareness of human rights and how to claim them when violated.

Creating capacity and a human rights culture

- Undertaking personal development on human rights and what this means for public services.
- Raising human rights with council staff and supporting the training of council officers.
- Sharing and learning from good practice.



Summary

The new Improvement Service project on human rights capability wishes to engage with elected members to raise awareness of human rights and build upon existing and establish new practices to engage with human rights issues. Engagement will be initiated through the running of elected member briefing sessions.

Elected members briefing sessions will consider and discuss:

- Your own awareness of human rights both internationally and in Scotland.
- The extent to which human rights currently feature in the decisions taken in your local authority.
- Any practice that you would wish to highlight in your local authority which is leading on human rights work.
- The type of resources, support, and training you would want to see from the IS capability building project.

Engaging with the project offers the opportunity to work with international human rights and to demonstrate leadership on deliver human rights for communities across Scotland with the potential to be noticed globally for human rights leadership.

Please speak to your officers if this is of interest and ask them to contact aidan.flegg@improvementservice.org.uk to arrange.



Further support and contacts

For more information and to discuss engagement with the human rights capability building project further, please contact Dr Aidan Flegg at aidan.flegg@improvementservice.org.uk

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Oct 2025

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The logo for Improvement Service, featuring the lowercase letters 'is' in a dark blue font. The letter 'i' has a red dot above it, and the letter 's' has a red dot at its bottom right end. Below the 'is' is the word 'improvement' in a dark blue sans-serif font, followed by the word 'service' in a red sans-serif font.
improvement **service**