

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

is.  
improvement service

# Strategic Framework 2023 — 2027

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# Foreword



Councillor Shona Morrison,  
Chair,  
Improvement Service Board



Sarah Gadsden,  
Chief Executive,  
Improvement Service

We are pleased to present the Improvement Service’s four-year strategic framework for financial years 2023/24 to 2026/27.

We have engaged with and listened to colleagues in local government and our partner organisations, to understand their challenges and priorities and the types of improvement support they need and value. This has enabled us to consider where the Improvement Service can make the biggest impact across the next period, ensuring that we continue to support local government to deliver sector-led improvement through our improvement architecture, products and services.

There are undoubtedly challenging times ahead for local government, with local authorities facing increasingly difficult choices about spending priorities, in the face of unprecedented financial pressures. There is uncertainty about the future shape and role of local

government, with the potential development of a National Care Service for Scotland and a review underway on education.

While local authorities are still managing their post-Covid recovery, they now also face a cost-of-living crisis that is affecting their own services as well as the lives of their citizens and communities. Poverty and inequality are increasing, impacting negatively on individuals’ and families’ life chances and opportunities, and increasing demand for council services.

There is increasing pressure to embed and accelerate climate change action, to enable local government to make a meaningful contribution to Scotland’s 2030 climate change target.

The use of digital services grew exponentially during the pandemic, and will likely continue to grow, creating different opportunities for the way in which local authorities do business. Likewise, the pandemic underlined the critical role of data and intelligence within public services, highlighting the importance of timely, relevant and good quality information for decision-making and the need for improvements in the way local government manages and uses data.

Whilst these challenges, along with Scotland’s aging population, have all combined to create an era of uncertainty for those working in and engaging with public services, they have also driven innovative thinking and transformational change within local government. Across the lifetime of this Strategic Framework, it will be important to build

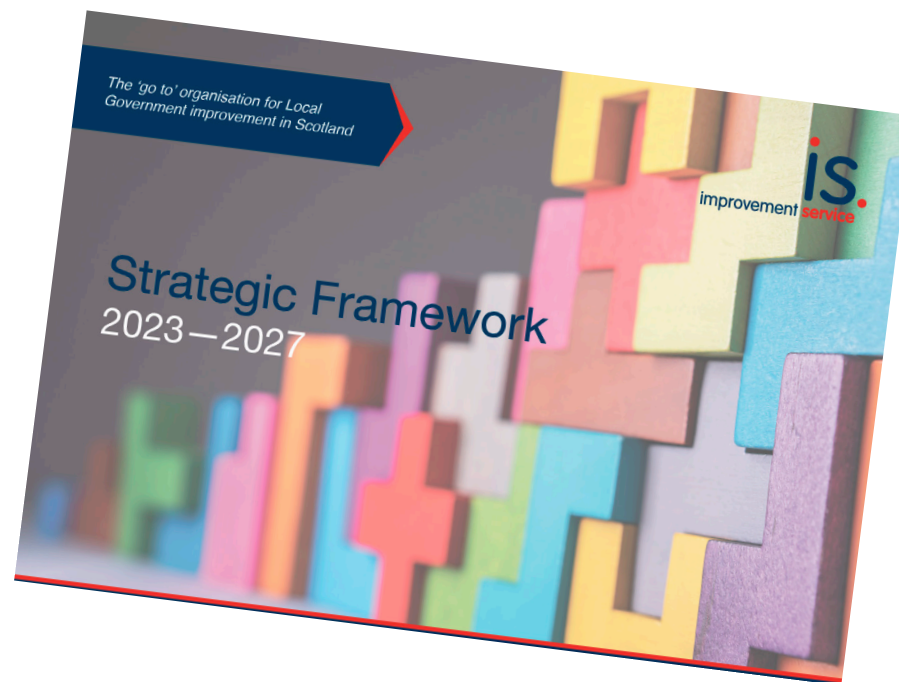
on the change achieved, using it as a catalyst to sustain and where possible improve and transform services, within the available financial resources.

The Improvement Service understands the challenges facing local government, as well as the opportunities they present to develop and improve public services. Our new strategic framework reflects that understanding.

It sets out our vision, purpose, values and strategic priorities, along with the unique contribution that we make. Our Framework will guide everything we do across the next four years. It will provide the basis for our annual business and resource plans, which will detail how we will deliver our strategic priorities. It will also shape how we work with our many partners, ensuring that our joint work with partners delivers real collaborative gain, which could not be achieved by either partner working alone.

If the last few years have shown us anything, it is that it is impossible to predict the challenges that we might face in future. What we can do is ensure that we remain a flexible, innovative and responsive organisation, able to adapt to support local authorities through whatever issues they encounter. We will continue to support local government to deliver sector-led improvement through our products and services and the collective efforts of our staff, Board and partners.

We will keep our Strategic Framework under annual review to accommodate any new or emerging challenges.





# Our Vision and Purpose

## Our Vision

*The Improvement Service will support local authorities, working with their partners, to deliver transformational change to sustain and where possible improve outcomes, reduce inequalities and achieve efficiencies.*

## Our Purpose

The Improvement Service is the national improvement organisation for local government in Scotland. We are a company limited by guarantee, with 34 members: COSLA, Solace and Scotland's 32 local authorities. We deliver improvement support that helps Councils to provide effective community leadership, strong local governance and deliver high-quality, efficient local services.

Our purpose is to:

- Support local government to deliver sector-led improvement through our improvement architecture;
- Provide leadership to local government and the wider system on transformation and improvement;
- Develop capability and capacity for improvement within local government;

- Support local authorities to collaborate and work together to tackle shared challenges and drive improvement and innovation;
- Support local authorities to share knowledge, practice, learning and skills;
- Deliver national improvement programmes for local government and partners, supporting local authorities to improve at a local level;
- Provide research, data and intelligence to inform local government's policy-making and decision-making and to drive improvement;
- Deliver national shared service applications and technology platforms; and
- Broker additional resources to support our improvement work.

We are governed by a [Board of Directors](#) nominated by COSLA and Solace. Our [website](#) and [business plan](#) provide more information about our [programmes of work](#), [how we work in partnership](#) with a range of organisations and our [shared values](#) that underpin everything that we do.

# What makes us unique?

We are the improvement arm of Scottish local government and a key member of the local government family, focused on supporting local government to deliver sector-led improvement. We are a trusted, supportive, dependable and responsive partner who understands local government and the challenges it is facing. Improvement support for local government is at the heart of everything that we do, and we deliver our work with honesty and integrity.



Figure 1. The local government family

We are open and transparent about what we do, and accountable to local government.

We are leaders in improvement, and our innovative and creative work across transformational change, performance and improvement, data and intelligence, and digital public services means that we are uniquely placed to support local government make communities better and more equal places to live.

We provide services to local authorities and their partners on a not-for-profit basis motivated by purely public policy objectives, supporting them to improve the quality and efficiency of the public services for which they are responsible.

We have a well proven and highly regarded improvement architecture embedded across a number of programmes, which can be deployed and flexed to support sector-led improvement across different policy and service areas.

We have expertise in delivering national shared services and technology platforms and national improvement programmes for local government and their partners in key policy and outcome areas.

We are creative and agile in developing responses to challenges and we care about doing the right thing. We tackle issues by experimenting, learning, adapting and collaborating. We have

developed a range of flexible and mobile working practices and can deliver products/services in person or remotely.

The work we do is far reaching. We are collaborative by nature and work closely with a wide range of partners including local and national government, Community Planning partners, national agencies, audit and inspection bodies, third sector organisations and Ordnance Survey. Our partnerships are important to us, and we strive to be an honest, transparent and accountable partner.

Our independence, impartiality and our status as a not-for-profit company enables us to access a wide range of grant funding and commercial income.

Our people are our biggest asset, many of whom have first-hand experience of working in local authorities or wider public services. We embrace collaboration, leveraging opportunities to transfer and trade experience, skills, expertise and capacity, wherever it resides.





# Our improvement architecture

We have a comprehensive improvement architecture which can be deployed and flexed to support sector-led improvement across different policy and service areas.

Figure 2. sets out our improvement architecture, which is comprised of a range of IS tools and approaches which are integral to our work to support local authorities with sector-led improvement.

All of the component parts of our architecture are interlinked, enabling us to bring together different elements of this architecture together, as required, to provide a holistic improvement response, where the sum is much greater than the individual value of the parts.

All of our grant funded programmes in policy/service areas are built around our improvement architecture, and we select the approaches and tools most relevant to achieving the programme's desired outcomes.

As well as designing, developing, delivering and constantly refining our improvement approaches and tools, we also play a key role in building the skills and capacity of local authority colleagues to engage with and use these tools and approaches.



Figure 2. Our improvement architecture



# Our Strategic Priorities

We have listened attentively to local authorities to understand their priorities and the type of improvement support that will be crucial over the next period. We have reflected on this, and about where we believe our energy, effort and capacity should be focussed to maximise our impact on local government, people and communities across Scotland.

Our priorities for targeting support for local authorities and their partners across the next four years are outlined below. Whilst described separately, they are clearly linked and interdependent.



Figure 3. Our strategic priorities

## We will assist local authorities to transform and transition to new models of service delivery

The world is transitioning fast, as society faces a cascade of changes affecting every aspect of our lives - our health, the economy, politics, our children's education, social care; from an ageing population to the effects of climate change - structural shifts are reshaping the world as we know it. The challenges this presents for local government requires a need to be radical and to lead the charge towards reform, working with Scottish Government, partners and communities.

### Our role

We have a critical role to play in supporting the design and configuration of services in ways that are truly transformative, sustainable and digital, focus on prevention, are designed around the needs of people and communities and generate financial savings.

### How we will deliver

We will:

- Work with local government and partners to deliver reform, including innovative and transformative models of service delivery and ways of working, focused on improving outcomes where achievable and supporting the sustainability and resilience of the sector. This will involve working with Solace to translate our think piece on 'Delivering a Future for Scottish Local Authorities' into tangible action.
- Manage and coordinate the delivery of the programme of work

on transformation agreed with Solace, through our Transformation Programme Management Office.

- Bring local authorities and partners together to develop collaborative, cross-sector and outcomes-focused approaches to service delivery.
- Provide support on service design to local authorities and partners, to ensure that services and systems are collaboratively designed with service users, people and communities.
- Develop capability and capacity for delivering transformation across local authorities.
- Publish and share case studies evidencing innovative, preventative and person-centred approaches to service delivery from across the UK and internationally.
- Deliver development opportunities for elected members as they navigate the changing landscape.
- Develop and promote the use of our national shared service applications and technology platforms, creating new digital public services to underpin new service delivery models.
- Develop expertise and capability within local government to unlock the potential of the vast quantities of data held by local authorities, to support preventative action.

## What we aspire to achieve

By March 2027, there will be examples of transformative and preventative approaches to service delivery in place between local authorities, and between local authorities and their partners, and we will be able to evidence our contribution to the delivery of these. Through our Transformation Programme Management Office, we will be making huge strides in working with Solace to translate our think piece on 'Delivering a Future for Scottish Local Authorities' into tangible action. We will be able to evidence increased resilience and sustainability within the sector and savings/efficiencies arising from our work.



## We will support local government to deliver sector-led improvement in a range of policy and service areas

Sector-led improvement is typically based on the underlying principles that local authorities:

- are responsible for their own performance and improvement, and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for individuals, families and communities;
- are accountable locally through their democratically elected representatives;
- have a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole, not just their own local authority; and
- are responsible for determining their own future, individually and collectively as a sector.

### Our role

We have a critical role to play in supporting individual local authorities with their own improvement journeys, providing a range of products, services and support as highlighted in our core improvement architecture. We equally have an important contribution to make in supporting the sector as a whole to improve in critical policy and service areas.

### How we will deliver

We will:

- Continue to develop and evolve our core capacities and capabilities to support local authorities to improve individually and collectively.
- Deploy and flex our core improvement architecture to support sector-led improvement across different policy and service areas.
- Explore with Solace and COSLA the appetite for the IS to redevelop and relaunch its peer review framework, to support local authorities to learn from each other as they consider ways to improve and transform services.
- Facilitate and coordinate peer networks across our existing and emerging work programmes, to support local authorities to share knowledge, practice, learning and skills.
- Continue to deliver and develop the Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) to support Councils' own improvement journeys through access to rich and timely comparative data and analysis, bespoke support for Councils, and peer events to share practice and learning.



- Use LGBF data to work with Solace and the LGBF Board (and professional associations) to identify and agree areas where there could be an opportunity for Local Government as a sector to focus its improvement on, and where our improvement support could therefore be targeted
- Continue to develop, deliver and embed our approach to self-assessment and improvement planning in local authorities and partnerships.
- Develop creative, targeted and engaging ways to share learning across local authorities and partners to support sector wide learning and improvement.
- Source, develop, publish and share good practice case studies from Scotland, the UK and internationally, and help local authorities and the sector apply relevant learning from elsewhere as part of its improvement journey.
- Deliver guidance, tools and other support mechanisms to help develop capability and capacity for improvement within local government.
- Work with the Accounts Commission, as part of our Strategic Alliance, to continue to explore how our sector-led improvement work can inform the Commission’s work programme and help deliver the aspirations of ‘The Crerar Review: the report of the

independent review of regulation, audit, inspection and complaints handling of public services in Scotland’.

### **What we aspire to achieve**

By March 2027, the burden of scrutiny, audit and regulation on local authorities will have reduced, as a result of the continued development of approaches to sector-led improvement which we are actively involved in delivering. We will be better able to evidence the contribution our work has made in supporting improvement in individual local authorities and in the sector overall.

## We will provide leadership and facilitate collaboration to enable a more preventative, integrated approach to tackling poverty and inequality

The pandemic exacerbated poverty and inequality, which has been further compounded by the cost-of-living crisis. This is impacting negatively on individuals' and families' life chances and opportunities and increasing demand for council services, in an environment of contracting budgets.

As part of the transformation of local government, it is crucial to focus on those who live with poverty and inequality, developing holistic family support services that break down silos of service provision between organisations, sharing data and information within organisations to ensure the right packages of support can be provided across services and meaningfully engaging with all the different communities of place or interest.

### Our role

Given the range of improvement work that we deliver in interlinked policy areas, for example [Covid-19 recovery](#), [child poverty](#), the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#), The Promise, the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, [early learning and childcare expansion](#), [trauma and gender-based violence](#), employability, [economic development](#), [climate change](#), [planning](#), [place](#) and [advice services](#), we are uniquely placed to work with local government to tackle poverty and inequality.

### How we will deliver

We will:

- Support local authorities and their partners to deliver whole systems, place-based and rights-based approaches to tackle inequality and prevent poverty, using our strong relationships with local and national networks and organisations.
- Promote innovative and creative approaches to addressing poverty and inequality and embed good practice across our work programmes.
- Work with local authorities to mitigate decisions being made in one policy area (e.g., climate change) having unintended consequences in another policy area (e.g., child poverty).
- Ensure that our strategic decisions are viewed through the prism of reducing poverty and inequality.
- Deliver development opportunities for elected members to support them to continue to take action to address poverty and inequality.
- Identify opportunities to use our data and intelligence services and expertise to enrich local and national understanding of poverty and inequality, and work with local authorities and partners to design solutions that work to address it.

- Ensure that we design and deliver digital public services that are inclusive, ethical and resilient and uphold people’s digital rights.

### **What we aspire to achieve**

By March 2027, there will be reduced inequalities in local populations, across service areas, as reported in the Local Government Benchmarking Framework. There will be examples of whole-systems, place-based and rights-based approaches in place to address inequality and prevent poverty, which we will have contributed to delivering. We will have embedded innovative and holistic approaches to tackling inequality across our work, including ensuring that we uphold people’s digital rights when designing and delivering our digital public services. We will have a clearer idea of how to use data and intelligence to target families who are vulnerable or experiencing poverty and have more examples of automation of support and benefits.





## We will support local government to deliver digital and data enabled transformation

Local Government and Scottish Government are committed to working together to deliver Scotland's Digital Strategy. Local Government and the Improvement Service has experience of delivering national shared digital services, and over the next period it will be important to consider which other services are ripe for digital enabled transformation.

Data and intelligence are equally important levers for enabling transformation. High quality data, evidence and intelligence are fundamental to informing local decision-making, service-design and ultimately transformation. The last few years has shown us that, when faced with significant and unprecedented events and crises, data and evidence becomes crucial to the decision-making process and guiding us to a better place.

### Our role

One of our key roles is to deliver digital public services and products to councils and their partners. This can take the form of delivering fully managed digital public services, from initial scoping through development and delivery to support and aftercare, or managing and supporting a pre-built or existing digital public service.

We also have a critical role to play in supporting councils in their efforts to develop the culture, systems and processes to unlock the insight and full value of their data to better understand citizens, improve services and drive efficiencies.

### How we will deliver

We will:

- Identify and deliver new use cases for our existing national shared service applications and technology platforms.
- Continue to develop and evolve our digital public services infrastructure and capabilities in response to opportunities emerging from the Solace/IS transformation work.
- Secure a role for the IS in the delivery of Scotland's Digital Identity ecosystem.
- Develop a digital National Entitlement Card, enabling citizens to access a range of public services through their mobile device.
- Work with the Digital Office for Scottish Local Government, COSLA, Solace and Public Health Scotland to deliver our ambitious plans to create one Data Platform for Scottish local government.
- Support local authorities to develop the tools and architecture needed to collect, store, manage, move, analyse, report and use data.
- Work with Solace and COSLA to ensure that our research, evidence, data and insight services are targeted in areas that will



help to inform local government policy-making and sector-led improvement.

- Explore opportunities around the development and potential for a shared research, data analysis and evaluation service for Scottish local government.

### **What we aspire to achieve**

By March 2027, we will be delivering an increased range of digital shared services/resources to local authorities and we will be able to evidence the cost-savings these are achieving for local government. We will be able to provide examples of our digital shared services/resources increasing the resilience and sustainability of the sector. We will be delivering an increased range of digital public services once for Scottish local government. We will have secured a key role in the delivery of Scotland's digital identity ecosystem. Local government will have successfully launched a Data Platform that we will have been integral to developing. We will be able to evidence how our research and data analysis services have informed local government policy-making and sector-led improvement.



# Measuring our Impact

We are acutely aware of the importance of understanding and being able to evidence that our work adds value and creates lasting impact.

We will seek feedback from our customers and partners on our contribution and impact in a variety of ways, including through our annual stakeholder survey and local authority relationship management service.

We face a perennial challenge of being able to attribute impact as a result of our support, and then placing a financial value on the resultant cost savings. We often support or enable local authorities and partners to review and improve the activities they deliver, which ultimately results in improved outcomes for people and communities.

Despite the difficulties, given the current financial pressures under which local government is operating, we are committed to improving our approach to measuring and reporting on our impact across the lifetime of this Strategic Framework. This will include progressing work to better evidence value-for-money and to demonstrate, where possible, what our activities are worth in financial terms.



# Our Contribution to Scotland's National Performance Framework

Our work plays a key role in supporting Scotland to achieve its National Outcomes.



Figure 3. Our contribution to Scotland's National Performance Framework

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The logo consists of the letters 'i' and 'S' in a dark blue, sans-serif font. The 'i' has a red dot above it, and the 'S' has a red dot to its right. Below this, the words 'improvement' and 'service' are written in a smaller, dark blue, sans-serif font. 'improvement' is in dark blue, and 'service' is in red.  
improvement **service**