

Holyrood Elections 2026 and the future of local government part three: education, children and young people

Published: 30th April 2026

Author: Paolo Vestri, LGIU Scotland Content Commissioner

Location(s): Scotland

Topics: Democracy & Governance, Elections & civic participation, Resources

Summary

This resource includes an article from the Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES) setting out their analysis of what is required from the next Scottish Government to address and reset public services for the next generation. ADES calls for new approaches to funding, whole system approach to workforce strategies and planning, clarity, coherence and consistency around the reform and inclusion agendas, and local empowerment to give local authorities “genuine flexibility to design local solutions based on the principle of subsidiarity.”

These demands are consistent with the approach put forward by COSLA in its recent White Paper on the future of school-aged learning.

The resource’s analysis of the over 150 commitments on education, children and young people made in the manifestos of the six main political parties highlights where there is consistency and a high level of agreement and then summarises where the manifestos provide differing proposals.

It then assesses how/ whether the manifestos align with the key demands made by ADES and COSLA:

- Sustainable funding
- Workforce planning
- Clarity and coherence around the reform agenda(s)
- Embedding genuine flexibility so local authorities can design local solutions based on the principle of subsidiarity.

This analysis concludes that the manifestos show that the parties are more disposed to impose more control over, and make more demands of, council education services rather than provide local authorities with the empowerment and greater flexibility that ADES and COSLA have said is required.

You can find the rest of the series below:

[Holyrood Elections 2026 and the future of local government part one: Scotland’s local government finance](#)

Introduction – COSLA and Directors of Education priorities for Education, Children and Young People

Education accounts for almost half of net revenue expenditure by councils in Scotland, making it the largest single area of local government spending. Every Scottish Government and First Minister has claimed that Education is one of the highest, if not the highest, priorities. So it is right that we focus on what the political party manifestos say about education, children and young people.

One of the six priorities set out by COSLA in its [2026 Manifesto](#) is “supporting our future generations to thrive in the modern world”. Under this priority, COSLA called for:

“A holistic approach to improving education. Local government has a sharp focus on delivering improved outcomes: simply measuring inputs does not achieve change. We seek commitment to a partnership approach to ongoing reform, led by education leaders in local Government and informed by a wide range of partners, including children and young people.”

In its more detailed White paper on [Local Government's Vision for the Future of School Aged Learning in Scotland](#) COSLA has set out nine priorities including:

- Sustainable multi-year funding
- Investment in the Workforce across Children's Services, including Education and Early Learning and Childcare
- Modernised Assessment, Curriculum and Qualifications
- Enabling better digital access, inclusion and literacy
- Embedding local flexibility into all national policies which impact on children and

families.

The Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES) provided its analysis of what needs to change in Education.

What Scotland needs next

Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES)

As Scotland approaches its next parliamentary term, the pressures on local authorities have never been more visible or more consequential. Across education, children's services, social care, and community support, councils are toiling to deliver the necessary services in conditions coloured by years of fiscal decline. Yet the system they are asked to steward is stretched beyond what it was ever designed to carry.

ADES, representing the senior leaders who lead Scotland's education and children's services, has been clear: without decisive national action, the gap between what communities need and what councils can deliver will continue to widen. But with the right choices, Scotland could reset its public services for the next generation.

Expectations vs Capacity – who wins?

Scotland aspires to excellence, equity, inclusion, wellbeing, rights-based practice, and high achievement. These are the right ambitions. However, greater clarity and consensus about what those aspirations look and feel like in practice would be worth agreeing on. But without prioritisation and investment, the system becomes performative rather than transformative. And if that is the result, there are no winners.

If the next government wants to stabilise and strengthen Scotland's public services, the following are the levers that matter most.

Approaches to funding

A shift to a long-term funding agreement spanning education, health, social work, justice, and communities, that gives councils the certainty to plan for the next decade, not the next budget cycle.

This would:

- End annual firefighting
- Enable strategic workforce planning
- Support early intervention rather than crisis response
- Align resourcing and national ambitions with local delivery

Scotland has long recognised the importance of prevention. This is the mechanism that would finally make it possible.

Whole-system workforce strategies and planning

Here's where we could see genuine transformation. This could include:

- Workforce strategy and planning are for all who work in Education, supporting our children and young people
- A targeted, coherent recruitment strategy for shortage subjects and rural areas
- A leadership pipeline from probationer to chief officer

Without a stable, valued workforce, no reform will succeed.

Reform

This needs:

- A joined-up approach taken by the key national bodies, with greater clarity on their respective roles and responsibilities.
- A pause on new initiatives and a moratorium on further reviews until the system

stabilises, otherwise there will continue to be a surfeit of “busy work” but little meaningful, sustainable change and improvement (unashamedly, we should do less but do it better)

- A shared national narrative about what success looks like (Professor Alma Harris asked recently – “what are the hallmarks of the Scottish Education System?” There is no consistent response to this question and there could and should be.)

Let’s aim for clarity and coherence in all areas of this work.

Inclusion

The recent review undertaken into ASN provision across Scotland sets out a number of recommendations which will require national and local partners to work together to address.

We would suggest that success will only be achieved in this area through the following:

- Clarity and consistency in approaches to assessment and identification of needs (by all, including Health Services)
- National workforce planning
- Quality training and development opportunities for all staff
- A funding model that follows need
- A national digital platform for ASN planning and transitions.

Improving the quality of provision, through appropriate resourcing, will help leverage greater equality across the system.

Whither The Verity House Agreement?

The Verity House Agreement (VHA) was to have been about rebalancing the relationship between national and local government. But has it? No. Could it? Yes.

Being true to VHA could lead to:

- Longer term, more strategic approaches to budget setting
- Give local authorities genuine flexibility to design local solutions based on the

principle of subsidiarity

- Require national bodies to support, not direct local delivery
- Strengthen local democratic accountability

Local authorities know their communities. They need the latitude and the resources to enable them to best meet the needs of the diverse communities across Scotland.

Is this a time for courage?

It feels like we could be at a crossroads. Choices for those in government could be about trying to patch the current system or seek to reframe and rebuild. We in ADES are clear: the challenges are real, but so is the opportunity. With long-term investment, a renewed workforce, coherent reform, and genuine local empowerment, Scotland can create a public service landscape, with education provision front and centre, that is resilient, equitable, and fit for the next generation.

The Manifesto Commitments

Areas of agreement/ commonality

The six main political party manifestos devote a large amount of space and over 150 commitments to education, children and young people. There are many areas where there is a high degree of agreement between several of the parties, including:

- Expanding Breakfast Club and Free School meal provision.
- Banning mobile phones in schools – supported by SNP, Scottish Conservative and Unionist (SCUP), Scottish Labour (SLP) and Reform UK.
- All parties, except Reform UK, refer to implementing the recommendations of the McManus Review into Additional Support Needs (ASN) or mainstreaming ASN and providing more resources and capacity to support pupils with ASN.
- Three parties – SNP, SLP and Greens – propose establishing career pathways for Pupil Support Assistants, and /or increasing the number of PSAs based in specialist

ASN units or schools.

- Most parties propose giving Headteachers more powers over school budgets, recruitment and power to exclude pupils from school.
- Three parties entered into a ‘bidding war’ on the number of additional classroom assistants they promised; SCUP – 1,000; SLP – 1,500; and, SLD – 2,000.
- Four parties (not SNP and Reform UK) propose to support the expansion of youth work or a preventive model of youth work
- SCUP, SLP and Reform UK propose to abolish Education Scotland. Reform UK says it will “abolish Education Scotland and return responsibility for Scottish education to the Scottish Government, answerable to Holyrood and not sheltered by yet another quango.”
- SCUP, Greens and Reform UK support bringing back the Survey of Literacy and Numeracy.
- SCUP, SLP and SLD mention Pupil Equity Funding.
 - SCUP – “PEF that goes directly to schools based on the number of disadvantaged pupils enrolled”
 - SLP – “Making PEF money permanent”
 - SLD – “inflation-proofing Pupil Equity Funding and legislating to make it a permanent feature”.
- SCUP, SLP and SLD propose developing a Workforce Plan or Strategy. Other workforce related commitments include:
 - ending use of short-term, zero-hour and temporary contracts for teachers.
 - increasing teachers in STEM subjects.
 - reducing teacher workload by removing bureaucracy or form filling.
 - increasing numbers of support staff.
 - making Additional Support Needs teaching a promoted post.
 - creating a national register of supply teachers.
 - providing Teacher Jobs Guarantee for a minimum of 3 years for newly qualified teachers.

- Several manifestos commit to supporting free music tuition, with none suggesting this policy should be reversed.
- Most parties detailed support for extending childcare.
- SNP – “to include all children from 9 months to the end of primary school, with financial support ranging from £1,400 to £11,000 a year depending on age and family income.”
- SCUP – “increase childcare options available for parents by implementing a true ‘funding follows the child’ model ... {and} Provide additional support to help parents return to work with a new ‘extra hours’ model of extended childcare for parents of children from age nine months.”
- SLP – “provide two weeks of funded holiday clubs during the summer and increasing the value of tax- free childcare so it is worth £3,000 per child” {and} “Improve the flexibility of the childcare system, with funding following the child.”
- Greens – “Extend the 1140 hours of funded childcare to all two-year-olds as soon as possible, starting from the Monday after their second birthday... [and] Expand funded childcare for all children aged 6 months to 2 years, aiming to provide a universal 570 hours of funded childcare for this group by the end of 2031.”
- SLD – Reform existing funded early learning and childcare provision, including “fairer rates” for providers, prioritising working families in any expansion “as funding allows”, and allowing entitlement across council boundaries so “funding follows the child”.

Manifesto commitments specific to each party

SNP

The SNP manifesto’s chapter on ‘*A Skilled Scotland*’ includes the following commitments:

- Provide all Primary 1 pupils attending a local primary school with {a Welcome to School Bag} a starter pack filled with essential items such as, stationery, a water bottle, books and resources.
- In the next Parliament, we will deliver the next phase of the Learning Estate Investment Programme... and our continued commitment to delivering a new Mull Campus, following effective community consultation.
- We will support the further expansion of dedicated Gaelic Medium schools and units, including encouraging Edinburgh to take forward a second GME primary school.
- Legislation to make reporting of harm to children, including child sexual abuse, mandatory by adults tasked with safeguarding young people.
- Expand the provision of BSL training for teachers, and we will ensure a pool of specialist deafblind teachers to support those children who are blind, partially sighted, deaf or deafblind.
- Over the lifetime of this parliament, we will take the steps necessary to at least maintain pupil-teacher ratios.

Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (SCUP)

The SCUP manifesto includes a chapter on ‘Improving Education at every stage of life’ with around 30 commitments, including:

- Reverse the imposition of Business Rates and VAT on private schools.
- Give schools the ability to opt out of local authority control and become grant-aided schools, like Jordanhill School in Glasgow. (This commitment is also made by Reform UK.)
- Return to knowledge-based learning with a new Curriculum for Aspiration.
- Introduce parent panels to oversee the content their children are taught on socially contentious issues such as sex education.

- Allow sabbaticals for teachers (and) extra pay for extracurricular activities.

Scottish Labour Party (SLP)

The SLP manifesto chapter on ‘Setting out Young People up to succeed’ has over 30 commitments on education, including:

- Expand the number of campus cops.
- Improve attendance with Family Network Coordinators as part of our plans to create family support hubs in primary schools.
- Create a National Attendance Register gathering better data on absence and attendance so targeted interventions can support young people to re-engage with school.
- Implement an education recovery programme with up to 2,000 specialist reading and numeracy teachers.
- Scrap... primary school testing, replacing it with standardised, sample-based testing and international benchmarking to gather better data on attainment.
- New widespread training on neurodiversity and additional needs for school and healthcare staff.
- Supporting mentoring programmes that help care-experienced and disadvantaged young Scots to build their confidence and achieve their potential.

Greens

The Greens’ manifesto, which includes a chapter on ‘*Schools and Young People*’ as well as a chapter dedicated to ‘*Childcare*’ is the most radical of the manifestos with over 35 commitments, including the following:

- Raise the school starting age to seven and introduce a play-based kindergarten stage for three- to six-year-olds.

- End the routine use of homework in primary schools.
- Scrap P1–S3 Scottish National Standardised Assessments... reducing the role of high-stakes exams, and increasing the role of continuous assessment throughout the year.
- Restructure National 5s... and remove end-of-term exams entirely for the National 5 course.
- Support the upskilling, retraining, and retention of Gaelic-speaking teachers and early years workers so every pupil across Scotland has access to some form of Gaelic medium education.
- Require and support schools in the creation of independent Pupil Unions.
- End the use of arbitrary targets for school and pupil performance, ending the situation whereby pupils who are more likely to hit targets are prioritised over others.
- Reduce class sizes to a maximum of 20 pupils, prioritising primary classes in this session of Parliament.
- Lower teachers' class contact time to 20 hours per week.
- End the routine use of national inspections and develop a new model of peer review and self-evaluation for teachers. National inspections will be restricted to cases of complaints or areas of concern.
- Integrate youth work with local and national mental health support and referral systems.
- Allow the funding for under-2s to be used to either pay for childcare in an early learning setting or subsidise the income of a parent who chooses to stay at home or reduce their work hours.

Scottish Liberal Democrats (SLD)

The SLD manifesto chapter on Education has over 35 commitments, including:

- Focus on play-based learning until the age of 7 so children acquire important

learning and social skills before formal schooling starts, starting this longer statutory Early Years Phase as a series of voluntary pilots.

- Create a Young Carers' Lead in every school and college.
- Introduce a Service Pupil Premium so that armed forces families in Scotland get the same benefit as those in England.
- Launch a review of the availability and quality of digital devices in schools.
- Revolutionise the school library experience through a new nationwide E-Library Service.
- Abolish... school league tables, based on nationalised testing, in favour of trusting teachers' judgement.
- Adopt a new culture within the measurement of education that values equally the range of routes to high-wage, high-skill jobs.

Reform UK

Reform UK's manifesto includes around 10 commitments in the chapter on Employment, Education and Training, including:

- Reboot the Curriculum for Excellence by giving it a knowledge-based curriculum at its core.
- Restore rigorous examination as the primary method of assessment, combined with standardised testing.
- Examine a new pathway for S3/S4 students into alternative, technical education based on the successful Newlands Junior College.
- Special needs provision will be reformed (no detail is provided on what this means on practice or how it will be achieved).

How do the manifestos match up to the demands of COSLA and ADES

How do the manifestos match up to the demands of COSLA and ADES around:

- Sustainable funding
- Workforce planning
- Clarity and coherence around the reform agenda(s)
- Embedding genuine flexibility so local authorities can design local solutions based on the principle of subsidiarity.

Sustainable funding

Although some parties do make some commitments to sustaining Pupil Equity Funding and increasing teacher or assistant numbers none of the manifestos commit to addressing the financial uncertainty around education and children's services. It is noticeable that, as is highlighted in the 2nd LGIU [Holyrood Elections 2026 resource](#), while several parties felt able to commit to significant increasing in funding directed to fixing potholes, the manifestos do not make similar commitments to increasing funding for education and children's services

Despite most parties acknowledging the need to end, or at least, reduce ring-fenced funding, most of them make commitments that could only be met through more ring-fenced funding; for example, the Greens' commitment to "End the endemic use of temporary contracts for teachers by *providing ringfenced funding* for councils to transfer teachers on temporary contracts onto permanent full time contracts.

Workforce planning

There is general agreement that a national Workforce Plan needs to be developed for the education sector most parties then provide detail as to what such a Plan or strategy should include such as lowering teachers' class contact time to 20 hours per week. As with many other issues, as outlined below, the parties want to pre-empt the discussion, and

agreement about the Plan and its content that local government needs to have with central government.

Whilst commitments such as increasing the number of support staff, Personal Support Assistants, and STEM or specialist teachers is to be welcomed. These only reinforce and increase central direction over teacher numbers, which is exemplified by the SNP commitment to “take the steps necessary to at least maintain pupil teacher ratios.”

Clarity and coherence around the reform agenda(s)

Despite the clear message from ADES and COSLA that education services and the children and young people that they serve need some breathing space from the constant barrage of new initiatives, policies and direction from central government the manifestos suggest that the next five years will offer only more uncertainty and change.

All the parties propose a whole host of changes to exams and testing, childcare provision, curriculum and potentially systemic changes to the current education system (e.g. abolishing Education Scotland, raising the school starting age to seven, a new Curriculum for Aspiration or allowing schools to opt out of council control) that would have major implications and capacity issues for councils and schools.

Where there is agreement on reforms, such as the MacManus Review of ASN provision, then these should be implemented as soon as possible, with the required funding being made available.

Embedding genuine flexibility based on the principle of subsidiarity

The summary of commitments made in the party manifestos shows that parties want to impose more control over, and make more demands of, council education services rather than provide local authorities with the empowerment and greater flexibility that ADES and COSLA have said is required. There is no indication in the manifestos that parties understand what subsidiarity means in practice.

Most parties want to give Headteachers more powers. For example, the Greens suggest “Take forward the reform necessary to empower headteachers to have a greater say in the education that their schools provide.” However, at the same time, all the manifestos propose a myriad of policies and initiatives over which Headteachers and local authorities will have no say and no control.

There are clear signs that all parties want to continue micro-managing education from the centre rather than allow local authorities local flexibility. Examples of this tendency include: the SNP commitment to “support the further expansion of dedicated Gaelic Medium schools and units, including encouraging Edinburgh to take forward a second GME primary school”; the SLP commitment to expand the number of campus cops; and the Greens proposal to “reduce class sizes to a maximum of 20 pupils.”

Conclusion

Whichever party or parties form the next Scottish Government, it looks as if they will continue to want to micro-manage education services. The manifestos provide little sign that there will be a positive and true partnership between the Scottish Government and local government to determine the priorities for education, children and young people based on financial sustainability, certainty and cohesion around workforce planning and future reform and embedding local flexibility rather than micro-management from central government.

Given the amount of control and micro-managing of the education system proposed by all parties, it is surprising that none have included in their manifesto even a hint about creating a national education service.