

SP2026 Manifesto Analysis

# Public sector efficiency and waste

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## Purpose, scope and method

### Scope

This analysis examines what the six main parties contesting the 2026 Scottish Parliament election say about reducing public sector inefficiency and waste. It covers quango reform, back-office consolidation, procurement, named efficiency programmes, welfare administration, red-tape reduction and general public-service productivity.

### Purpose

Rather than look at individual manifestos or the differences between them, I have taken what might be an unconventional approach and looked at commonalities: **where might the parties set aside ideological and tribal politics to work together in the interests of Scotland?**

After all, even if the SNP get a majority it may be a fragile one. The probability remains that throughout or at some point in the parliament, two or more parties will have to work together. That is exactly how the parliament was intended to work. It does on many occasions, but not nearly enough.

There are also a skint public sector and a stagnant economy. We aren't going to solve those issues without more collegiate working.

### Method - please read these important notes

I have not done this as paid or even unpaid work for any client. It has been for my own interest and as a contribution to reframing the conversation between the worlds of politics, business and society.

It would not have been humanly possible - for your author at least - to read, digest and cross-reference all of the manifesto content and produce a timely report. Therefore I have used a sophisticated AI tool to help before doing a light-touch review and edit of the most important points. **Both AI and human may have made mistakes. Please do not rely on it as definitive.**

Talking points represent my view and are designed to support further discussion and enquiry.

All page references cite the published PDF page number. Page references are not definitive of a party's whole position - they are signposts to one or more places where policy points are mentioned, not a comprehensive index.

**Parties covered:** Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Labour, SNP, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Greens and Reform UK Scotland. They are listed in no particular order.

### Links to manifestos

- [Scottish Conservatives manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Labour manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [SNP manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Liberal Democrats manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Reform UK Scotland manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Greens manifesto \(PDF\)](#)

## Cross-party consensus

Efficiency is the rare theme where every party has something substantive to say. And yet there is very little prospect of the benefits being achieved, because they won't withstand contact with reality. The main reason for this is the extent to which 'efficiencies' will plug the fiscal gap, even if they could be realised; the truth is they will barely touch the sides.

### Broad agreement (four or more parties)

- **The quango landscape is too big and too expensive.** Conservatives, Labour, Lib Dems and Reform propose quango reduction, consolidation or closure. Conservatives target a 25% reduction and £1.5bn a year; Labour would cut by a third; Lib Dems propose a review with halved consultancy spend; Reform would shut quangos altogether. SNP and Greens commit to selective consolidation rather than mass cuts. (Conservatives p.8-11; Labour p.4, 19, 81-83, 94-97; Lib Dems p.16, 95; Reform p.5, 14; SNP p.11, 21, 43, 47; Greens p.22)
- **Back-office consolidation and shared services.** Five parties reference back-office merger or shared services as a savings route. Only Reform rejects the incremental approach in favour of closure. (Conservatives p.10, 31, 56; Labour p.19, 56; Lib Dems p.16; SNP p.47; Greens p.22)
- **Cut red tape and reduce bureaucracy for business.** Five parties use the phrase "red tape" or "reduce bureaucracy". Only the Greens stay outside the consensus, framing regulation as protective. (Conservatives p.26, 28, 68, 77; Labour p.15, 32, 78, 81; Lib Dems p.18, 22, 23, 26; Reform p.13; SNP p.11, 21, 39)
- **Government efficiency as a named programme.** Labour proposes a team for government efficiency within a new Scottish Treasury; Reform proposes a Department of Government Efficiency; the Conservatives propose SAVE. The naming differs; the intent is similar. (Labour p.82; Reform p.14; Conservatives p.8)

### Narrower agreement (two to three parties)

- **Halving government consultancy spend.** The Lib Dems commit explicitly. The Conservatives reference cutting spending on external campaigning organisations. The theme is shared; the numbers differ. (Lib Dems p.16, 95; Conservatives p.8, 13)

- **Consolidating health and social care bodies.** Labour cites “over 50 health and social care bodies or quangos” and would reduce the total. The SNP commits to substantial consolidation. The Conservatives would cut senior management roles by a third and merge corporate functions across boards. (Labour p.19; SNP p.47; Conservatives p.56-57)
- **Procurement reform to save money.** Labour proposes social and economic value weighting with a Scottish Treasury; the Lib Dems target micro-bidders and a Fair Payment Code; the Greens prioritise worker-owned suppliers; the Conservatives would simplify procurement. (Labour p.32; Lib Dems p.23; Greens p.25; Conservatives p.26)
- **Welfare administration costs.** Reform cites £0.5bn administering £6bn of benefits. The Conservatives call out Social Security Scotland’s costs. Labour prioritises efficiency and effectiveness. No party publishes a like-for-like comparison with DWP unit cost. (Reform p.8; Conservatives p.15; Labour p.13)

## Talking points

### Scale of savings claimed

The Conservatives claim £1.5bn per year from quango cuts and £500m from SAVE in year one. Reform cites £6.5bn across 132 quangos. [This latter example is particularly misleading as the Fraser of Allendar Institute sets out clearly.](#)

Labour cites the one-third quango reduction without a headline saving. These numbers are not apples-to-apples. What share of quango spend is pass-through to delivery and would survive any closure regardless?

The cost of closing bodies is not captured anywhere. Redundancy, IT-separation, contract novation, pension settlement, legal risk - these routinely run into tens of millions per body. Closing 25 to 100 quangos within a parliamentary term would surely be the biggest public-sector change programme Scotland has ever attempted. It is not costed in any of the manifestos.

Also, **organisational change is hard. It is really, really hard.** Political parties find it hard to manage themselves, let alone an entire state! What is the opportunity cost of focussing on marginal gains with all the mental energy and resource that would have to go into it?

### **Consolidation versus choice**

Consolidation does not always deliver savings. It can create larger, less accountable bodies that absorb more overhead, not less. The Conservatives, Labour and Reform propose consolidating or abolishing bodies; the SNP proposes selective consolidation and new bodies (Major Projects Office, National Council for Economic Growth). None of them sets out the conditions under which consolidation delivers.

Two other important questions: who decides what a quango is and when it is problematic? Is it automatically better to take a well-functioning and valuable independent body and fold it into the government? Surely we can manage smarter ways of thinking?

### **Red tape and regulation**

Five parties commit to cutting red tape without specifying which regulations should go. The Conservatives propose a Reduction of Red Tape Bill drawn from business consultation. Which specific rules are in scope – building standards, safety, environment, planning? Lots of people who otherwise are against regulation have been calling for new regulations for vape shops.

Every rule results from someone lobbying for one, whether a charity, a community, a business sector or some other interest group. Someone will need to be annoyed!

And what about just making the rules work better?

### **Procurement**

One example where that could happen is with procurement. In many cases it ensures best value for money for high-quality products and services. In other cases, it's a pointless triumph of process over outcome that drains energy and resource from buyer and seller.

### **Welfare administration**

The Conservatives and Labour both reference Social Security Scotland efficiency but propose different routes: the Conservatives consider merging benefits administration; Labour would improve effectiveness.

### **What the SNP and Greens say about efficiency**

The SNP includes a reduced-bureaucracy theme and commits to streamline processes and consolidate government and NHS support bodies.

The Greens explicitly reject “austerity disguised as efficiencies” but concede shared backroom services.

### **Measurement and accountability**

Who measures what? Labour proposes a Scottish Treasury to report on how efficiencies deliver improved results. The Conservatives' SAVE would report to Parliament.

## At a glance

The table below summarises each party's headline approach to public sector efficiency and waste.

| Theme                    | Conservatives                               | Labour  | SNP   | Lib Dems                                   | Reform                                     | Greens  |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|--|--|---|
| Flagship efficiency body | SAVE (Taxpayer Agency)                      | Government efficiency team in Scottish Treasury | Consolidation of existing public bodies       | Review of the quango landscape             | Department of Government Efficiency        | Selective shared back-office services             |
| Quango target            | 25% cut; £1.5bn/yr; ban on new ones         | One-third cut                                   | Selective consolidation; some new bodies      | Halve consultancy spend; review landscape  | Shut down; return powers to ministers      | No target; reject indiscriminate cuts             |
| Red tape                 | Reduction of Red Tape Bill                  | Cut bureaucracy across key sectors              | Streamlined regulation                        | Cut red tape for business                  | Reduce bureaucracy strangling the economy  | Streamline where it helps delivery                |
| Procurement reform       | Simplify procurement                        | Social and economic value weighting             | Community Wealth Building Bill                | Micro-bidder friendly; Fair Payment Code   | Not central                                | Prioritise worker-owned and circular              |
| Back-office savings      | Merge NHS senior management; cut by a third | Consolidate 50+ health and social care bodies   | Consolidate government and NHS support bodies | Crack down on SNP waste and duplication    | Eliminate duplication via closures         | Shared backroom services where feasible           |
| Key differentiator       | Statutory savings Act plus dedicated agency | New Treasury function; reinvest into services   | Continuity plus named consolidation targets   | Value-for-money test; no tax-cut trade-off | Radical closure; tax-cut funding mechanism | Reject austerity framing; redirection over saving |

## Scottish Conservatives

### General thrust

The Conservatives treat public sector waste as the single largest addressable fiscal gap. The pitch is simple: a dedicated agency, a statutory savings programme and a hard target on quangos. SAVE is the flagship. (p.8-11)

### Key proposals

- **SAVE agency:** Scottish Taxpayer Agency of Value and Efficiency, led by business leaders, recommending £500m of savings to Parliament in year one. (p.8-9)
- **Taxpayer Savings Act:** legislation to deliver at least £1.5bn of annual quango savings. (p.8, 11)
- **Quango reduction:** cut by at least a quarter and bar any new quango without an equivalent closure. (p.8, 11)
- **Red tape:** Reduction of Red Tape Bill drawn from direct business consultation; moratorium on regulatory divergence with the rest of the UK. (p.26-27)
- **NHS efficiency:** cut senior management by a third; merge corporate functions across boards; consolidate back office; redirect savings to frontline roles. (p.56-57)

- **Welfare admin:** merge benefit streams with overlapping purposes; reform Social Security Scotland administration. (p.15, 17-18)
- **Culture:** consolidate Creative Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland and related bodies. (p.31)

### How they propose to fund it

Delivery is primarily statutory: savings enforced by Act of Parliament and reported by SAVE. The assumption is that proceeds redirect to frontline roles rather than tax reduction. The transition cost of closures - redundancy, IT separation, contracts - is not scored.

## Scottish Labour

### General thrust

Labour combines a one-third cut in quangos with a new Scottish Treasury and a government efficiency team. The manifesto is explicit that proceeds should go into improved public services rather than tax cuts. (p.82-83, 94)

### Key proposals

- **Quango reduction:** at least a third, starting with economic agencies and health bodies. (p.4, 83)
- **Scottish Treasury:** government efficiency team; end wasteful spending and external-agency contracts. (p.82)
- **NHS bureaucracy:** review the 50-plus health and social care bodies; remove duplication via a One Scotland approach. (p.19)
- **Economic agencies:** consolidate Scottish Futures Trust and SE investment funds into SNIB; end Business Gateway in its current form. (p.28-29)
- **Procurement:** social and economic value weighting; micro-bidder support; long-term shipbuilding procurement plan. (p.32)
- **Social Security Scotland:** efficiency and effectiveness as a stated priority. (p.13)

### How they propose to fund it

Delivery is led by the new Scottish Treasury. The affordability section commits to no income tax rate rises for five years and argues consolidation savings will be additional to planned spending. No transition cost is scored and the productivity dividend is asserted rather than modelled. (p.92)

## SNP

### General thrust

The SNP accepts there is scope to reduce bureaucracy but rejects mass quango closure. The framing is continuity plus selected consolidation, with a dedicated reduced-bureaucracy theme in the manifesto. (p.11, 21, 47)

### Key proposals

- **Reduce bureaucracy:** pillar of the reform programme - a more efficient and focused state. (p.11, 21)
- **Regulatory simplification:** further simplify regulation to cut business bureaucracy. (p.19, 39)
- **Streamlined processes:** consolidate Scottish Government and NHS support bodies. (p.43, 47)
- **Joined-up delivery:** more modern and efficient public services. (p.45)
- **Simpler pathways:** patient pathways redesigned to prevent treatment delays. (p.48)

- **Community Wealth Building Bill:** keep wealth circulating locally and reform procurement. (p.40)

### How they propose to fund it

Delivery sits within existing government and NHS structures. No headline saving figure is published. The manifesto does not endorse a mass quango reduction target. Fiscal capacity rests on the Block Grant and, long-term, independence.

## Scottish Liberal Democrats

### General thrust

The Lib Dems frame efficiency as a taxpayer-value commitment and target specific high-profile areas: consultancy spend, the quango landscape and duplication. They reject unaffordable promises and commit to link efficiency to public-service outcomes. (p.13, 16, 95)

### Key proposals

- **Consultancy spend:** halved; savings reallocated to front-line services. (p.16, 95)
- **Quango landscape:** cluttered; reviewed for best value for money; bureaucracy cut; duplication reduced. (p.16, 95)
- **Crack down on waste:** explicit commitment to give taxpayers real value for money. (p.13)
- **Tax reform team:** specialist capacity part-funded by the Hunter Foundation. (manifesto fiscal section)
- **Procurement for SMEs:** Fair Payment Code; access for micro-bidders; overhaul of public-sector procurement. (p.23)
- **Public-servant innovation:** allow staff to test and scale promising ideas; give colleges and local authorities freedoms. (p.44, 95)

### How they propose to fund it

Ministerial accountability, a published quango review and a consultancy-spend target provide the delivery mechanism. The manifesto is explicit that people cannot pay more in the cost-of-living crisis, so savings are reinvested in services rather than used for tax cuts. The scale of saving is plausible but modest relative to the service-pressure gap.

## Reform UK Scotland

### General thrust

Reform's position is the most radical of the six. The party treats the size of the state as the core problem and points to 132 quangos costing £6.5bn. The prescription is wholesale closure, tax cuts and a government efficiency department. (p.5, 14)

### Key proposals

- **Efficiency department:** cut waste, duplication and administrative bloat. (p.14)
- **Quango closure:** shut them down and return powers to democratically elected ministers. (p.14)
- **Net Zero rollback:** scrap SNP Net Zero targets, subsidies and quangos; Reform argues these drive cost and bloat. (p.9)
- **Welfare admin reform:** cites £0.5bn cost to administer £6bn of benefits; face-to-face assessments; overhaul Social Security Scotland. (p.8)
- **Reduce bureaucracy:** named principle for creative industries, farming and tourism. (p.13)

- **Civil service reboot:** end automatic work from home. (p.14)
- **Roadworks:** Lane Rental Schemes to cut disruption. (p.12)

### How they propose to fund it

Savings from quango closure and welfare reform are presented as paying for income tax cuts, with a cumulative growth dividend. Long-term funding is paired with UK pension fund capital. Transition costs of large-scale closure are not scored and the £6.5bn figure aggregates pass-through spend not in genuine overhead. (p.11)

## Scottish Greens

### General thrust

The Greens oppose efficiency drives framed as austerity but concede savings can be found through shared services and procurement reform. The manifesto is explicit: performance and savings yes, austerity disguised as efficiencies no. (p.22)

### Key proposals

- **Shared backroom services:** explore savings across the public sector. (p.22)
- **Wildlife legislation:** consolidate into a single, consistent Act. (p.81)
- **Apprenticeships:** streamline the system with colleges and universities. (p.24)
- **Curriculum for Excellence:** reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, implementing the Tackling Bureaucracy report. (p.35)
- **Procurement:** prioritise worker-owned and circular-economy suppliers. (p.25)
- **Austerity framing rejected:** citing decade-long service damage. (p.22)

### How they propose to fund it

Funding for public services is framed as expansion funded by new taxes, not by saving. Shared services and procurement savings are reinvested rather than used to reduce tax. The new-tax underpinning does most of the fiscal work, and is covered in the economy and tax reports.