

COSLA's Health and Social Care Spokesperson, Cllr Paul Kelly, delivered the keynote address at the 'Scotland Policy Conference: Next Steps for the Health and Social Care System' on 18th May.

Good morning colleagues,

It is a real pleasure to be here with you today to discuss what I believe is one of the most important questions facing Scotland today: how we build a health and social care system that is sustainable, person-centred, and truly rooted in the needs of our communities.

For those who don't know me, I'm Councillor Paul Kelly. I'm the Spokesperson at COSLA for Health and Social Care and a councillor in North Lanarkshire.

I'm sure you've all heard of COSLA, but I'd like to start by explaining what our role is. We're the representative voice of all 32 Local Authorities in Scotland. We're a councillor-led, cross-party organisation. We work to champion the essential work of Local Authorities, provide political leadership on national issues, and advocate for a fair settlement for Local Government.

As a membership organisation, we work on behalf of our member councils. An important part of my role includes working closely with the Integration Authorities and Health Boards across Scotland to reflect the importance of integrated joined up services for our communities.

At COSLA, we are clear that strong communities start with Local Government. We are also clear that direct accountability and decision-making closest to those we share our towns, villages and cities with, keeps us focused on local people, local families, their needs and their priorities.

We meet at a critical moment with a new incoming Government and Parliament. The pressures on our services are well known—rising demand, significant demographic changes now and which are anticipated into the future, urgent workforce challenges, and increasingly constrained public finances.

But alongside these pressures, we also have a clear opportunity. Health and Social Care Reform gives us a renewed direction of travel towards reforming and renewing our health and social care system so that it remains sustainable and delivers for our citizens now and into the future.

Today, I want to focus on one central theme: the pivotal role of local government in turning health and social care reform – and indeed, wider public service reform – into reality. In coordinating change, redesigning services, and ultimately delivering better outcomes for people and communities across Scotland.

Today's session asks us to consider the implementation of the Service Renewal Framework across the local and national levels.

The Service Renewal Framework, which was jointly published by COSLA and the Scottish Government, sets out a shared vision to shift the balance of care, to prioritise prevention and early intervention, to reduce inequalities, and to ensure people can access the right care in the right place at the right time.

But the framework is not an end in itself. It is a starting point.

Its success will depend not on what is written down on paper, but on how effectively we implement it—how we translate ambition into practical, visible improvements in people's lives.

And that is where local government comes in.

Because if we are honest, transformation does not happen in national policy papers. It happens in communities—in homes, in neighbourhoods, in local partnerships. It happens through relationships, trust, and understanding of local need.

Local government is uniquely placed to lead that transformation.

We bring together housing, social care, education, community planning, and economic development. We work closely with the third sector, with carers, and

with communities themselves. We understand the lived reality of the people we serve.

This means that true integration—what the Service Renewal Framework calls for—cannot be delivered without local government leadership.

Integration is not simply about structures. It is about coordination—aligning services around people rather than systems. That requires: shared decision-making; local accountability; strong partnerships between councils, NHS boards, and integration authorities; and, crucially, a focus on outcomes rather than organisational boundaries.

Local government's role is to anchor that integration in place, ensuring services are designed around the specific needs of each community.

One of the most important principles in the Service Renewal Framework is the shift towards prevention and early intervention.

For too long, our system has been weighted towards responding to crisis. That is not sustainable—neither financially nor operationally. And it's not in the interests of our communities.

Local government is already leading the way in this shift.

Across Scotland, councils are investing in:

- Early years support
- Community-based services
- Reablement and independent living initiatives
- Support for unpaid carers
- And tackling social determinants of health such as housing, poverty, and isolation

This is not just good practice—it is essential system redesign.

Because we know that health outcomes are shaped far beyond hospital walls. They are shaped by where people live, how they connect to their communities, and the support they receive before needs escalate.

The role of local government, therefore, is not simply to deliver services—but to reshape the system itself, moving from reactive to preventative, from fragmented to coordinated.

The framework rightly challenges us to rethink how services are designed.

We must move away from a “one-size-fits-all” model and towards person-centred, place-based approaches.

Local government has a critical role here, because they are closest to communities. They understand diversity of need—across rural and urban areas, across different population groups, across varying levels of deprivation and inequality.

Redesigning services is not always about large-scale reform. Often, it is about practical, local changes—better coordination between services, simpler access pathways, more flexible support.

But taken together, these changes can be transformative.

However, we cannot talk about transformation without talking about the workforce.

Our social care and health workforce have shown extraordinary dedication, particularly in recent years. But they are under immense pressure.

Local government has a key role in supporting workforce development; improving conditions and career pathways in social care; promoting integration across professional boundaries; and ensuring staff are empowered to innovate and lead change.

The Service Renewal Framework recognises that a sustainable workforce is fundamental to a sustainable system. And that sustainability must include not just recruitment, but retention, wellbeing, and professional recognition.

We must also recognise the vital contribution of unpaid carers, whose role is essential to the functioning of the system, and ensure they are properly supported.

Furthermore, we know that health inequalities remain one of Scotland's most persistent challenges. The Service Renewal Framework places a strong emphasis on reducing these inequalities—and rightly so.

Local government is central to this agenda.

Through community planning, councils bring together partners to address the wider determinants of health:

- Poverty and income inequality
- Housing quality
- Access to services
- Social connectedness

These are not peripheral issues—they are at the heart of health and wellbeing.

Underlying all of these challenges and opportunities is a single, crucial factor: coordination.

We do not lack commitment. We do not lack vision. But too often, we struggle to align our efforts.

The Service Renewal Framework gives us a mandate to strengthen coordination across national and local government; health and social care services; and wider public, third, and independent sectors.

Local government plays a crucial role in making that join-up real—through community planning partnerships, integration joint boards, and local leadership.

But coordination also requires clarity of roles, clarity of accountability, and clarity of shared outcomes.

We must ensure that all partners are pulling in the same direction, with a shared understanding of what success looks like.

So where do we go from here?

The next steps are about implementation—and implementation requires focus, discipline, and collaboration.

From COSLA's perspective, our priorities are clear:

- Strengthening local leadership and governance, ensuring councils and local partners are empowered to lead change in their areas.
- Supporting place-based transformation, enabling flexibility for local innovation while maintaining national coherence.
- Delivering meaningful integration, ensuring health and social care partnerships are equipped and supported to succeed.
- Investing in prevention, by shifting resources upstream to reduce long-term demand.
- Valuing the workforce, working with partners to ensure fair work and sustainable staffing. And finally;
- Embedding lived experience, ensuring people and communities shape the services they rely on.

These are not easy tasks. But they are achievable—if we remain committed to partnership and to shared outcomes.

In closing, I want to return to where I began.

The challenges we face are significant. But so too is our collective capacity to address them.

The Service Renewal Framework represents a shared commitment between national and local government. It recognises that no single organisation can deliver this transformation alone.

While COSLA and Scottish Government can set the national direction, real improvements to people's lives can only take place through close work with our communities – through the delivery of key services that you carry out every day. As we reform our services to meet changing needs, both now and into the future, we need to take people with us, ensuring that communities are able to shape services that meet their needs and priorities. COSLA is committed to working with our local partners to deliver upon the vision for a Scotland in which we reduce the inequalities between the most and least deprived areas so that all people can live healthier, longer and more fulfilling lives.

Local government stands ready to play its part—not just as a partner, but as a leader in redesigning public services around the needs of our communities.

Because ultimately, this is not about structures or systems. It is about people.

It is about ensuring that every person in Scotland can live with dignity, access the support they need, and thrive in their community.

If we keep that focus—if we work together, coordinate effectively, and empower local leadership—then we can turn the vision of the Service Renewal Framework into a reality.

Thank you.