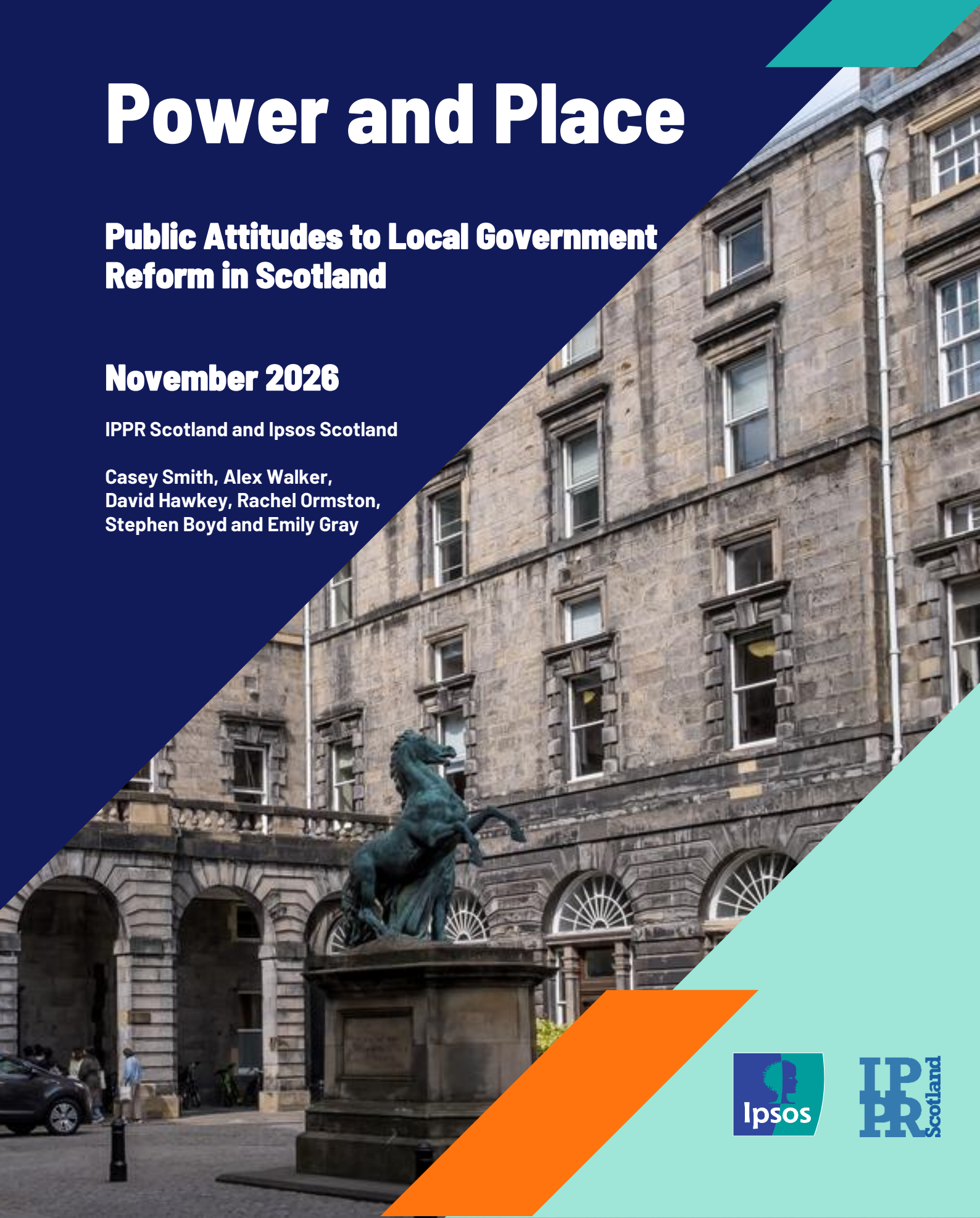
Power and Place

Public Attitudes to Local Government Reform in Scotland

November 2026

IPPR Scotland and Ipsos Scotland

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Executive Summary

Scotland faces renewed debate about where power should sit and how local government should be organised. New public attitudes research from Ipsos Scotland and IPPR Scotland reveals a clear tension at the heart of local government reform. While a majority of the public favour greater decision-making powers for local councils in principle, confidence in councils is low and there is no clear public mandate for structural reorganisation.

Public satisfaction with councils is low

Scotland is facing a crisis of confidence in local councils. Ahead of the 2010 General Election, more Scots were satisfied than dissatisfied with the way their council ran things. That picture is reversed now: only 25% of the Scottish public are satisfied with the way their local council runs things, while 52% are dissatisfied. Public dissatisfaction with local councils is also higher in Scotland than it is in England.

Dissatisfaction is especially pronounced among people living in smaller council areas and in authorities serving more deprived populations. It is also particularly high among Reform UK voters, which is likely to reflect wider political disaffection as well as views of councils themselves.

The public favours local flexibility

A majority, 53%, say it is more important for local areas to control their public services to suit local needs, even if quality and cost vary across Scotland. Twenty-nine per cent prioritise consistent services across the country, even if this means less local control. Support for greater local control is strongest in rural areas, at 62%.

There is also more support than opposition for giving councils greater decision-making powers: 48% support this, compared with 27% who oppose. People who are satisfied with their council on the whole favour giving them more powers. Meanwhile, those who are dissatisfied with their council are evenly split between support for and opposition to more powers for councils. This indicates that although being satisfied with local council performance is correlated with support for councils having greater decision-making powers in future, around one in five of the public still favour greater powers for local councils despite their dissatisfaction with how their council is performing currently.

No clear demand to redraw the map

The Scottish Government's emerging reforms are partly based on the argument that existing councils can be "too large to be local" or "too small to be strategic". However, the largest proportion - 49% - think their council covers an area of about the right size, and this proportion is similar irrespective of council size. Twenty-six per cent say it is too large to be genuinely local, and this too is consistent across council sizes – although residents of the Highlands and Islands are more likely than those living in other regions of Scotland to say their council is too large. In contrast, 9%

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believe their council is too small to plan and deliver services effectively, but this rises to 17% among those living in smaller council areas.

The survey did not directly test the Scottish Government's proposals for local government reform, which at the time of writing are under consultation, so these findings should not be read as opposition to these. They do suggest, however, that there is no overwhelming popular demand for reorganisation. Reformers will need to explain what problems structural change would solve and what practical improvements residents would experience.

Scotland is divided over elected mayors

There is no public consensus on the option of introducing directly elected mayors. A quarter, 25%, think a mayor would be good for their local area, while a similar proportion, 27%, think one would be bad. The largest group, 33%, says a mayor would be neither good nor bad.

Mayors are viewed more positively by young people, Labour voters and residents of the Glasgow parliamentary region, but less positively by older people and those in the Highlands and Islands. Public attitudes in England have become more favourable as mayoral institutions have developed and become more visible. Scotland's current ambivalence may therefore reflect limited familiarity rather than fixed opposition. Nevertheless, the findings underline the difficulty of applying a model developed around English city-regions uniformly across Scotland.

Any programme of local government reform must build public confidence

Overall, the public wants local services to reflect local needs and is more supportive than opposed to giving councils additional powers. But there is no consensus that councils are the wrong size or that they would or would not benefit from Mayors. Dissatisfaction with local government should not be mistaken for a clear public mandate for council mergers, a new two-tier structure or directly elected mayors.

The challenge is not simply to identify where powers should move. Successful reform needs to present residents with a much clearer account of the problem for which changing the structure of local government is the solution. With public satisfaction with council performance low and views about structural alternatives unsettled, successful reform will also require meaningful engagement with communities and an approach responsive to the very different circumstances found across Scotland.

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1 Introduction

If there is a common theme that runs through the story of modern Scottish politics, it is the question of legitimacy and who holds power. Typically, this has been framed at a national level around how Scotland should be governed.

Over its 27-year history, the Scottish Parliament has accumulated significant powers and grown into the central institution of Scottish political life, becoming a distinctly national answer to those questions of power and legitimacy. However, in the interim period between the closure of the original Parliament of Scotland and its reconvening in its current form in 1999, Scottish local government was the principal democratic mechanism outside of Westminster through which Scottish interests could be expressed.

Scotland's current system of 32 unitary local authorities was established in 1996, before the creation of the Scottish Parliament. The Parliament therefore inherited a system of local government that had recently undergone substantial reorganisation and was not designed around Scotland's new devolved institutions.

Despite promises that devolution would empower Scottish local democracy alongside a Scottish Parliament, and that the principle of subsidiarity would apply, some have argued that councils have instead been increasingly disempowered. Policing and fire and rescue services have been centralised at the national level, while fiscal autonomy has been curbed through council tax freezes and increased ringfencing of budgets. However, councils retain responsibility for major public services, including schools and social care. The balance between national consistency and local autonomy has therefore remained a central and contested feature of Scottish devolution.

This debate also takes place in a wider context in which the UK is the most fiscally centralised country in the G7: more than 95% of its tax revenue goes to central government, compared with less than 5% retained at the subnational level. Although devolution has transferred substantial powers from Westminster to the Scottish Parliament, this has not always been accompanied by the further devolution of power within Scotland.

Scotland faces many challenges that local government will need to play a crucial role in addressing. With Scotland's fiscal position coming under increased strain, questions are being raised about how we fund and structure the services needed to support people and build a prosperous society. Against this background, the current SNP Scottish Government have determined that effort to address questions of sustainability and enhanced service provision requires a renewed, empowered form of local government in Scotland. This has informed the Scottish Government's proposals, released last month, to reform local government in Scotland.

Devolution is also central to the agenda of the new Labour Prime Minister, Andy Burnham. While Burnham has sometimes used 'local' and 'regional' devolution interchangeably, his commitment to moving power, including revenue-raising powers, down and out from Westminster is clear. In

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Scotland, he has argued that the same principle should apply within the devolved settlement, with power moving out of Holyrood as well as Westminster. Burnham argues that such devolution is necessary to address longstanding geographical inequalities in the UK, which have limited opportunities for wealth generation outside London and the South East.

With both the UK and Scottish Governments now stressing the importance of devolving power away from the centre, this paper seeks to plug a gap in the discussion of this topic in Scotland that has, so far, included limited reference to Scottish public opinion. Produced in partnership by IPPR and Ipsos Scotland, it draws on new Ipsos polling exploring public attitudes towards local government in Scotland, where decision-making powers should sit, and support for potential reforms to the system. We argue that the public's views must be considered as proposals for local devolution are developed: after all, the successful realisation of any reforms will depend heavily on how the public respond to them.

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2 How satisfied are the public with local government at the moment?

England and Scotland entered the 2010s with different systems of national, regional and local government, and their approaches to regional and local governance have since diverged further. Since the 2010 general election, England has developed a new tier of strategic governance across an increasing number of its regions, principally through combined authorities. Nineteen new strategic authorities have been formed, thirteen of which now have mayoral devolution, with a further six areas awaiting mayoral powers. This followed earlier, unsuccessful attempts to establish elected regional assemblies, most notably the proposal rejected by voters in the North East of England in 2004.

Scotland followed a different path. National devolution established the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive in 1999 (the Scottish Executive was renamed the Scottish Government in 2007). Yet, no comparable tier of elected regional government was created below Scotland's national institutions.

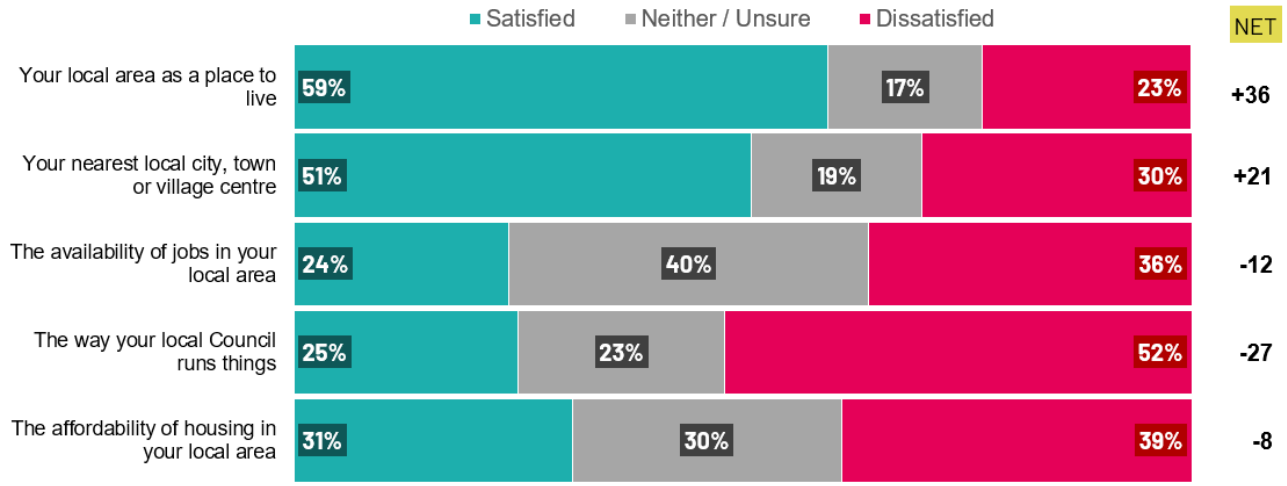
This may be about to change. The Scottish Government has opened discussions on potentially far-reaching reform, including an initial proposal to replace the current structure with a smaller number of regional authorities and a larger number of community authorities. However, as of mid-November 2026 the proposals remain at an early stage and provide limited detail on the future authorities' boundaries, responsibilities or funding. Another round of Scottish local elections will take place in May 2027, and the shape of the next local government term will depend heavily on the outcome of that consultation. If the proposed reforms proceed, much of that term is likely to be taken up with managing the transition to a new system. Ahead of these potential reforms, how do Scots view their local councils, and what does this reveal about how those reforms may be received by the public?

2.1 Overall satisfaction with local councils

Our new Ipsos data shows that Scots are generally dissatisfied with the way that their local councils run things. Just over half (52%) say that they are dissatisfied, while a quarter (25%) are satisfied (See Figure 2.1). Views of local areas in general are much more positive, though, with 59% saying that they are satisfied with their local area, while 23% are dissatisfied. This suggests that dissatisfaction with councils does not simply reflect wider dissatisfaction with the places in which people live.

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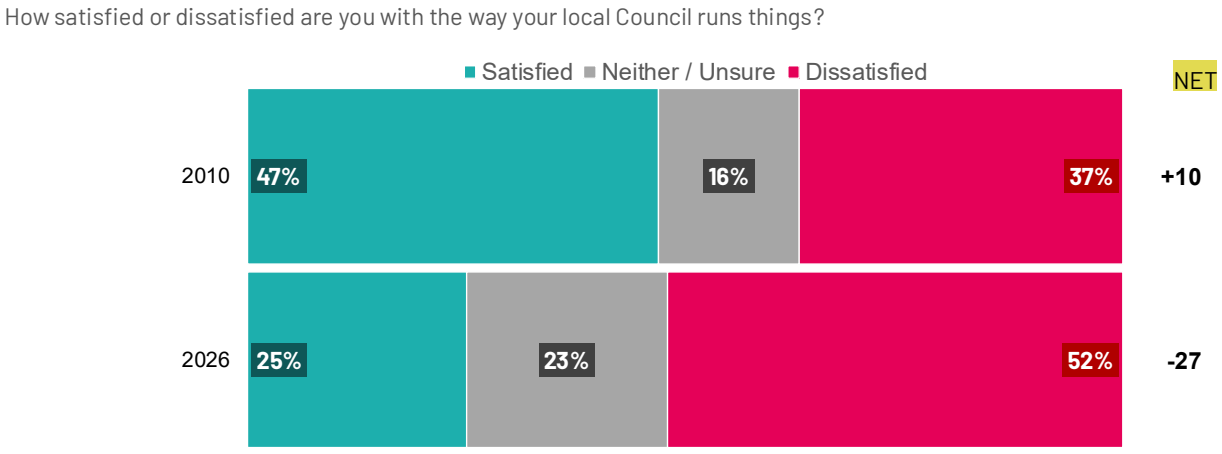
Figure 2.1: Satisfaction with local council and area



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish Adults 16+, 18-28 September 2026.
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

The current findings also point to a broader deterioration in public attitudes towards Scottish local government. Ipsos polling conducted before the 2010 general election showed that 47% of Scots were satisfied with the way their council ran things, while 37% were dissatisfied. The balance of opinion has now reversed: 25% are satisfied and 52% are dissatisfied. Net satisfaction (the proportion who are satisfied minus the proportion who are dissatisfied) has therefore fallen from +10 to -27, a decline of 37 points (See Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2: Satisfaction with local council: Trend



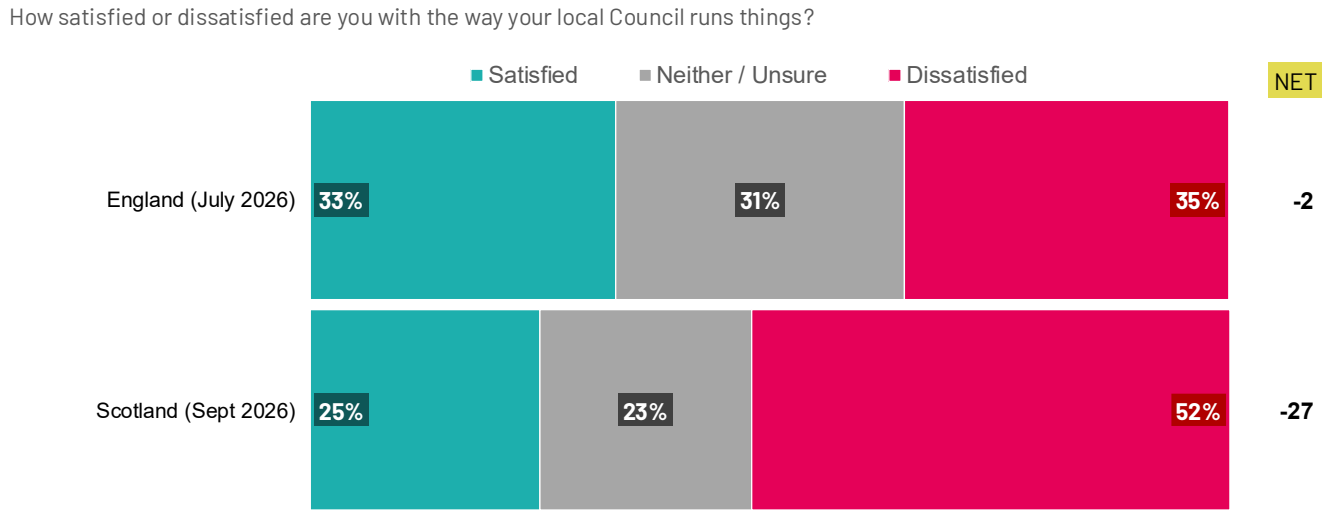
Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults 16+, 18 – 28 September 2026; 1,005 Scottish Adults aged 18+, 14-17 April 2010.
Note: Question wording in 2010 was: "Now thinking about your local council. Taking everything into account, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way your council runs things". 2010 polling conducted via telephone, 2026 polling conducted online.
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

This deterioration in views of local councils is also evident, albeit less pronounced, in Scottish Household Survey data. The proportion agreeing that their local council provides high-quality services fell from 43% in 2009/10 to 38% in 2025. The two questions measure different aspects of

public opinion but together indicate a longer-term weakening of positive perceptions of local government in Scotland.

Public attitudes towards local councils are also less favourable in Scotland than in England. Ipsos data from July 2026 show that a third of adults in England (33%) are satisfied with the way their local council runs things, and a similar proportion (35%) are dissatisfied. Satisfaction in our latest Scotland polling (conducted September 2026) is eight percentage points lower than in England, while dissatisfaction is 17 points higher (see Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3: Satisfaction with local council: England and Scotland



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults 16+, 18 – 28 September 2026; 2,417 Online English Adults aged 16+, 9 – 15 July 2026
Note: Scotland polling conducted using representative quota sample, England polling conducted using representative probability sample.
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

There are several possible explanations for this difference in attitudes between Scotland and England. It may partly reflect perceptions of service delivery: Ipsos research from 2025 found that 74% of Scots, compared with 62% of people in England, thought public services in their local area had deteriorated over the preceding five years. Scotland's more limited local devolution may also play a role. The relatively limited autonomy and visibility of Scottish local government could make councils appear less able to respond effectively to local priorities. Other features of Scotland's system of government, including the presence of the devolved tier at Holyrood, could also influence views. Responsibility for declining services is not attributed to councils alone: among Scots who thought local services had deteriorated, 62% said the Scottish Government was mainly responsible, while 54% said local councils were mainly responsible.

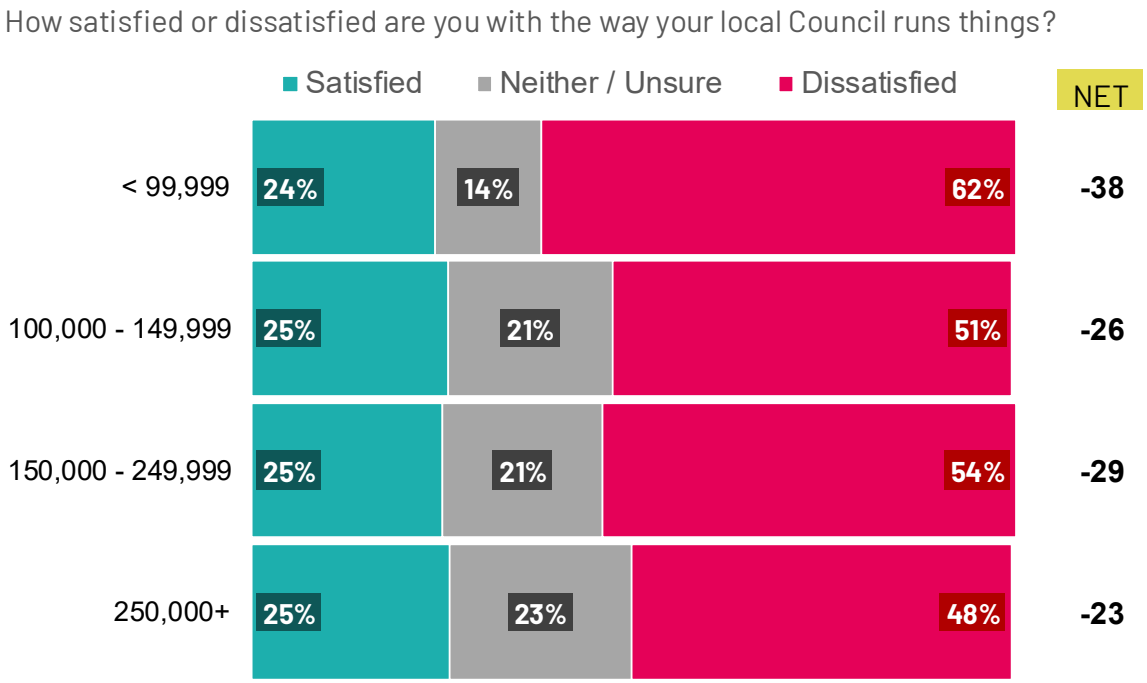
The overall picture in Scotland is therefore seemingly of widespread and worsening dissatisfaction with local government delivery. However, attitudes are not uniform, with the extent of dissatisfaction varying by council size, socioeconomic context, age, and political outlook.

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2.2 Council size and socioeconomic context

Satisfaction with local councils varies according to the size and socioeconomic characteristics of the areas they serve. People living in council areas with populations below 100,000 are more dissatisfied with how their council runs things than those living in areas with populations of 250,000 or more (Figure 2.4). This is particularly relevant to the debate about the future scale and structure of local government in Scotland, explored later in this paper.

Figure 2.4: Satisfaction with way local council runs things by local authority population size



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults aged 16+, 18 - 28 September 2026, including Local Authority Population size <99,999 (137), 100,000 – 149,999 (207), 150,000 – 249,999 (239), 250,000+ (449).
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

Satisfaction also varies according to the socioeconomic characteristics of the populations councils serve. This can be examined using the Improvement Service's local authority family groupings. The Improvement Service uses two sets of family groups: one based on the characteristics of the populations served, including relative levels of deprivation and affluence, and another based on the type of area served, such as whether it is urban, semi-rural or rural. The analysis here uses the former (Figure 2.5).

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Figure 2.5: Improvement Service Local Authority Family Groupings for Children, Social Work and Housing indicators

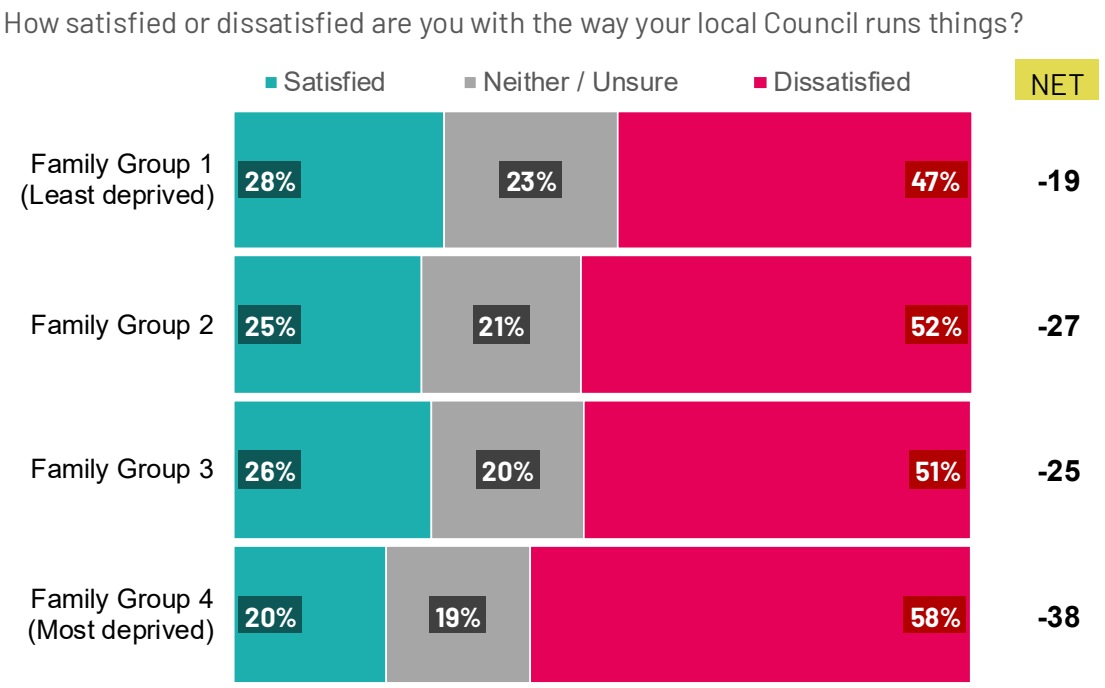


Family Group 1	Family Group 2	Family Group 3	Family Group 4
East Renfrewshire	Moray	Falkirk	Eilean Siar
East Dunbartonshire	Stirling	Dumfries & Galloway	Dundee City
Aberdeenshire	East Lothian	Fife	East Ayrshire
Edinburgh, City of	Angus	South Ayrshire	North Ayrshire
Perth & Kinross	Scottish Borders	West Lothian	North Lanarkshire
Aberdeen City	Highland	South Lanarkshire	Inverclyde
Shetland Islands	Argyll & Bute	Renfrewshire	West Dunbartonshire
Orkney Islands	Midlothian	Clackmannanshire	Glasgow City

Analysis by family grouping reveals a marked socioeconomic pattern (Figure 2.6). Among people living in family group 4, which contains the council areas with the highest levels of deprivation, 58% are dissatisfied with how their council runs things and just 20% are satisfied, giving a net satisfaction score of –38. By comparison, among those living in family group 1, which contains the council areas with the lowest levels of deprivation and greatest affluence, 47% are dissatisfied and 28% are satisfied, a net score of –19. Net satisfaction is therefore 19 points lower among those living the most deprived group of councils compared with those living in the least deprived council areas.

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Figure 2.6: Satisfaction with way local council runs things by local authority Family Grouping



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults aged 16+, 18 - 28 September 2026, including Family Group 1 (279), Family Group 2 (190), Family Group 3 (280), Family Group 4 (284)
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

This pattern may reflect the more challenging context in which councils serving disadvantaged populations operate. These authorities may face higher or more complex levels of need, while residents may be more exposed to pressures on local services and the wider consequences of constrained public resources. Assessments of councils may also be influenced by people's broader experiences of their neighbourhoods and public services, including services for which councils are not solely responsible.

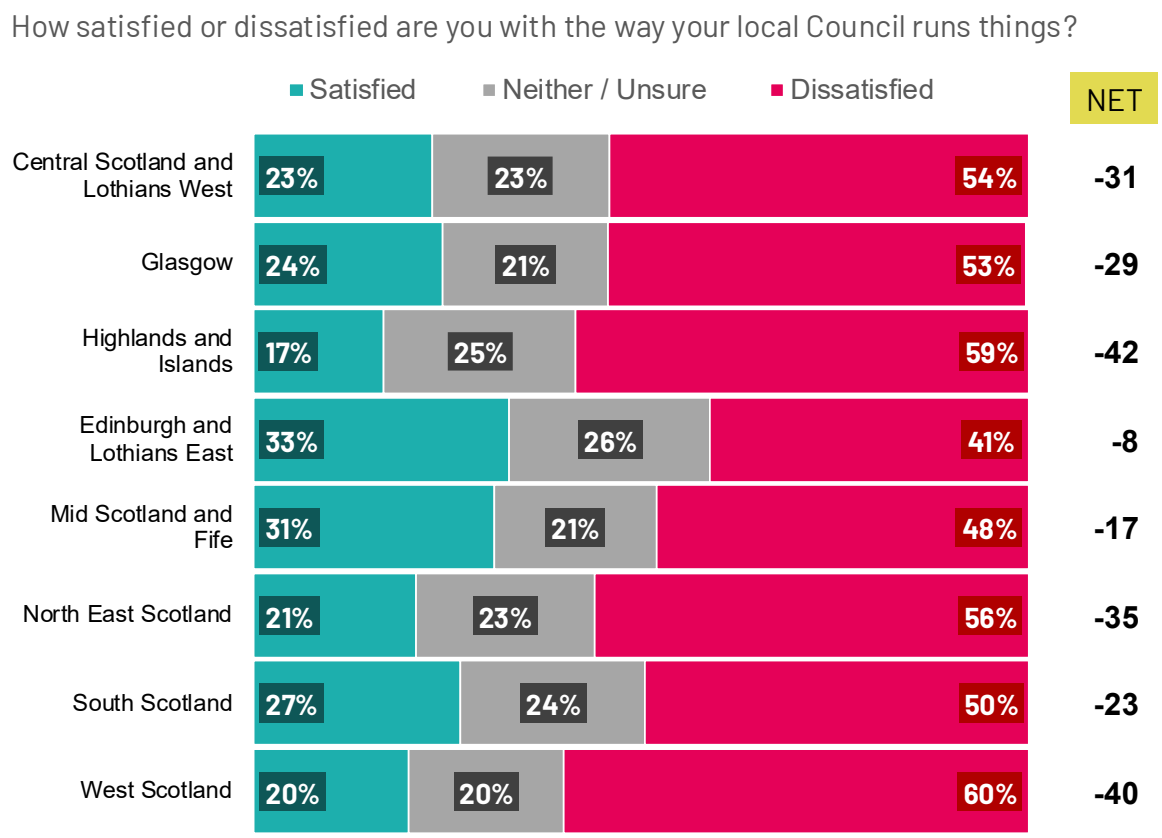
2.3 Scottish Parliament Region

Similarly, a range of factors are likely to be behind the significant differences in satisfaction with local councils by region, including regional deprivation levels as well as salient local issues or the performance of individual councils.

Our data shows that those living in Edinburgh and the Lothians East tend to be the least dissatisfied with the way their local council runs things (33% satisfied, 41% dissatisfied), while those in West Scotland and the Highlands and Islands are most dissatisfied.

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Figure 2.7: Satisfaction with way local council runs things by Scottish Parliament Region



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults aged 16+, 18 - 28 September 2026, including Central Scotland and Lothians West (129), Glasgow (132), Highlands and Islands (84), Edinburgh and Lothians East (134), Mid Scotland and Fife (126), North East Scotland (143), South Scotland (140), West Scotland (141) regions.
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

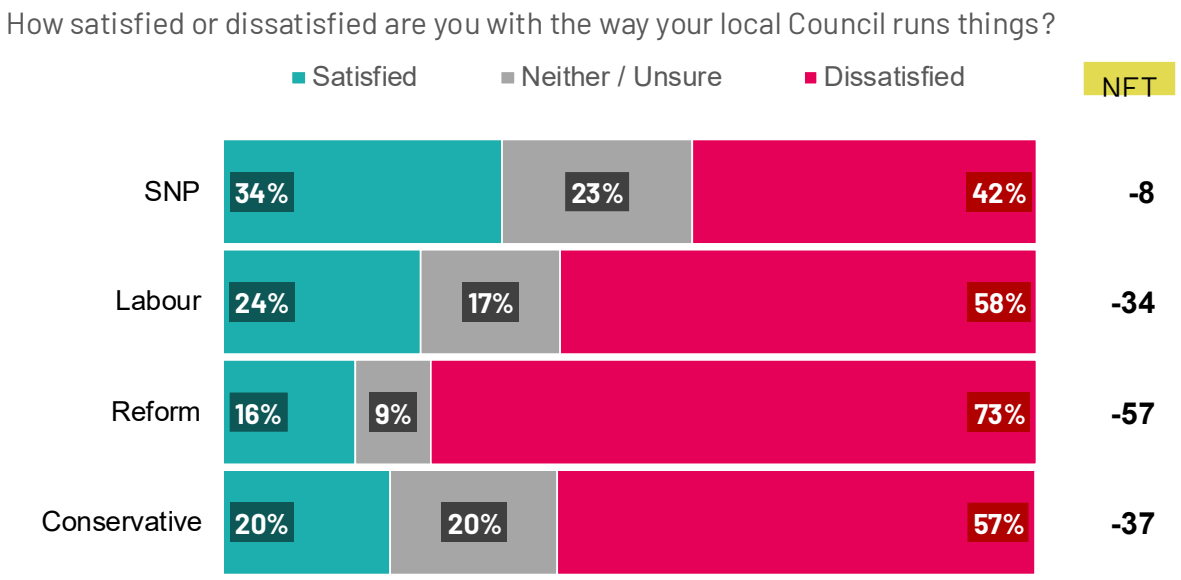
Higher dissatisfaction in the Highlands (as well as relatively lower satisfaction in North East Scotland) may reflect the distinctive challenges of delivering services across large geographic areas and dispersed populations. Longer travel distances, more limited access to some services and the costs associated with serving rural and remote communities could all shape residents' experiences.

2.4 Political outlook

Political outlook also appears to structure public attitudes towards their local councils. In particular, almost three-quarters (73%) of those who voted Reform UK on their constituency vote in the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections are dissatisfied with the way their local council runs things. This is significantly higher dissatisfaction than we see among voters for other political parties (Figure 2.8). Indeed, just 16% of Reform UK voters are satisfied, producing a net satisfaction score of -57. By contrast, SNP voters are comparatively less dissatisfied. Around a third (34%) are satisfied, significantly more than among each of the other voter groups shown. However, even among SNP voters, dissatisfaction with local councils still outweighs satisfaction.

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Figure 2.8: Satisfaction with way local council runs things by 2026 Scottish Parliament Constituency vote



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults, including 2026 Scottish Parliament Election SNP voters (319), Labour Party voters (176); Reform UK voters (105), Conservative voters (87*)
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

The particularly negative views of Reform UK voters may form part of a broader pattern of political and social dissatisfaction, rather than relating only to local councils. Our findings also show that most Reform voters (86%) believe that Scotland is heading in the wrong direction, and that they are significantly more likely than average to be dissatisfied with their local area as a place to live (42% dissatisfied vs. 23%). Ipsos Scottish Political Monitor findings from March 2026 showed that Reform UK supporters were more likely than supporters of other parties to identify a lack of faith in politicians, political parties and government as an important issue facing Scotland.

2.5 Summary

Overall, these new findings establish a challenging context for reforming local government in Scotland. With confidence in how councils currently operate relatively low, does the public sees greater local control as part of the solution? The next chapter considers this question.

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3 How much support is there for further local devolution of power?

Esther Roberton, Coordinator of the Scottish Constitutional Convention in the 1990s, has commented that during that period, she would often respond to concerns about whether a new Parliament would "suck up powers from local government" with a resounding 'no'. This was because all members of the Convention had committed to subsidiarity and to devolving powers out of the Parliament. "How wrong could I have been?" she has since lamented, arguing that "subsequent governments have drawn powers to Holyrood and centralised many of the functions of local Councils".

Since 1999, the relationship between Scottish and local government has been characterised by disputes over remit and where policy responsibility lies. Successive Scottish Governments have introduced policies, from council tax freezes to the creation of Police Scotland, that have centralised power and reduced local control. While such policies have been partly informed by a desire to provide consistent, universal access to public services and benefits across the country, this has come at the expense of the autonomy of local authorities. Despite Scotland's geographic diversity and wide dispersal of population from north to south, in comparison to other European states, Scotland is governed in a far more centralised way.

This has been a topic of fierce criticism from the body representing Scotland's local authorities. For example, COSLA has criticised national freezes on Council Tax as obstructing the main independent revenue raising lever available to councils and confusing lines of democratic accountability. Proposals to centralise social care in the now abandoned plans for a National Care Service attracted similar criticisms from COSLA around the removal of local democratic accountability.

How then do the Scottish public view this tension between national consistency and local control over local services?

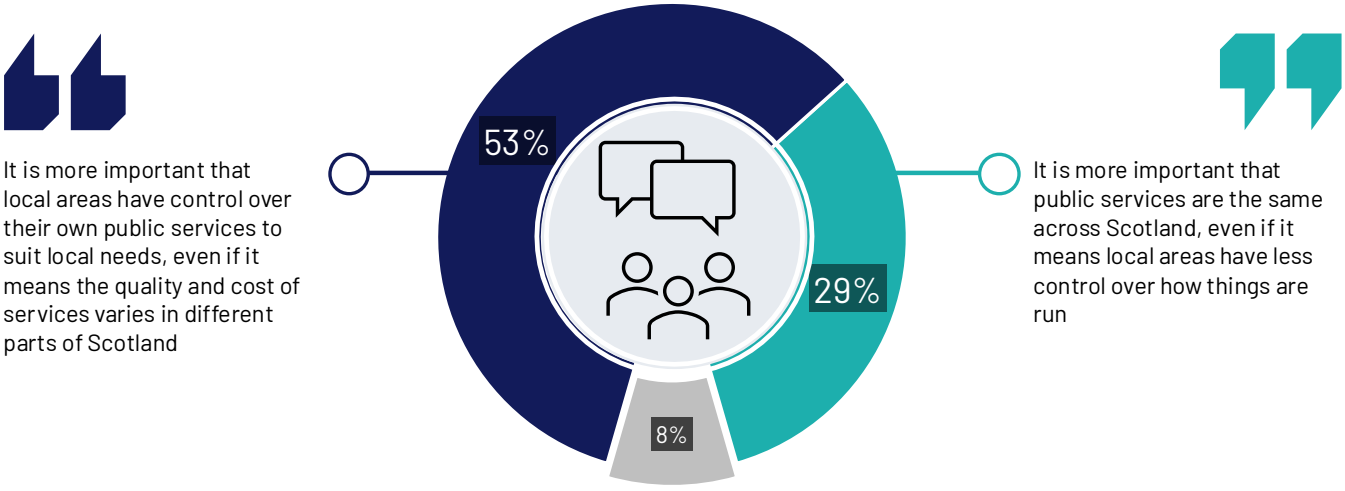
3.1 Local flexibility vs. national consistency

Overall, a majority favour greater local control and flexibility over nation-wide consistency. Over half (53%) say that it is more important that local areas have control over their own public services, even if it means the quality and cost of services vary across Scotland (Figure 3.1). By comparison, 29% think that it is more important that public services are the same across Scotland, even if it means local areas have less control over how things are run. A further 8% say that neither statement comes close to their view. Rural respondents are significantly more supportive of the principle of local control and flexibility (62%, compared with 51% in urban areas).

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Figure 3.1: Views on the management of local public services

When thinking about how local public services (such as bin collection, road maintenance, local transport, housing, and skills training) are managed, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults 16+, 18 – 28 September 2026
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

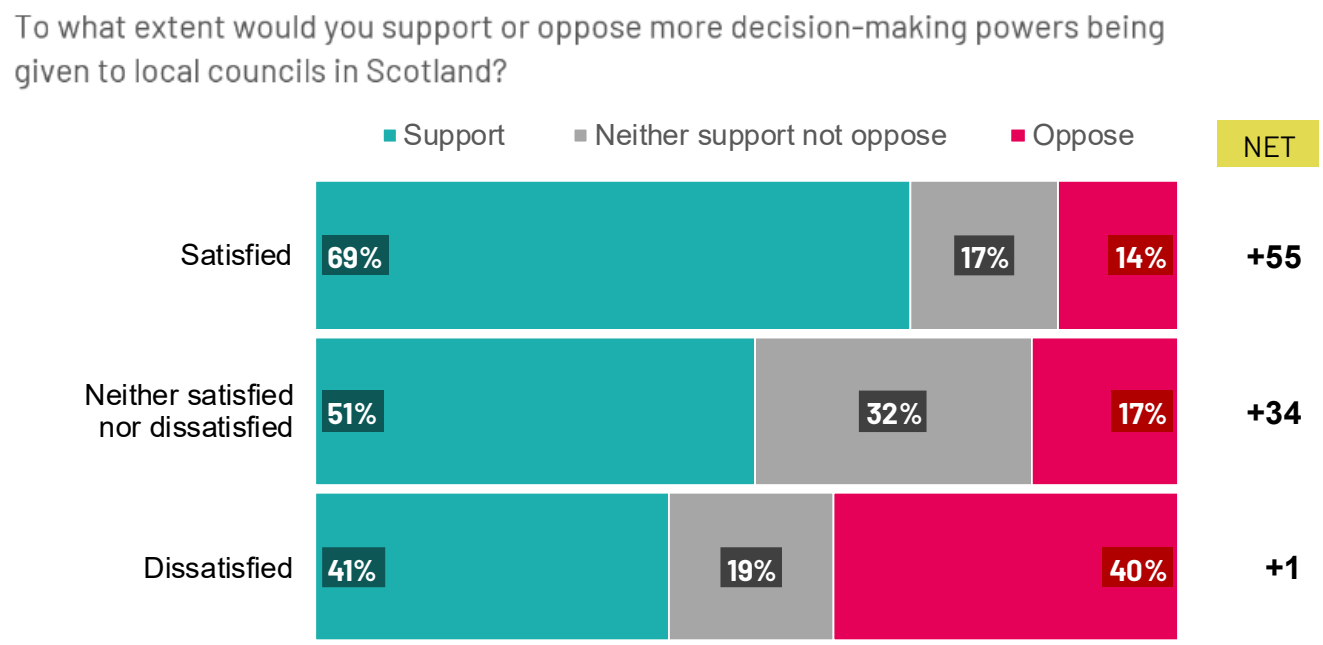
Separately, we asked whether people supported or opposed local authorities in Scotland being given more decision-making powers. Just under half, 48%, supported this, but a sizeable minority, 27%, are opposed to such a move. Both questions therefore indicate the balance of Scottish public opinion is in favour of greater local devolution, but with a substantial minority opposed and/or favouring national consistency over greater local control.

3.2 Relationship with current satisfaction

Those who are already most satisfied with the way their council run services are more likely to support greater decision-making powers for their local authority (69% support and 14% oppose) (See Figure 3.2). However, those who were dissatisfied with their council were roughly evenly split between supporting and opposing more powers (41% support and 40% oppose). This means that, while support for greater local decision-making is clearly correlated with satisfaction with current council performance, around one in five of the public favour greater local devolution *in spite of* their dissatisfaction with current council performance.

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Figure 3.2: Views on giving local councils more powers by satisfaction with how local councils run things



Base: 1,033 Scottish adults aged 16+, including those who are satisfied with the way their local council runs things (255), those who are dissatisfied (537), and those who are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (216).
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

3.3 Summary

These findings show strong – though not universal – public support for local flexibility and devolution of decision-making to the local level. The next chapter considers how the public might respond to more specific changes to council size and to local leadership.

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4 How might the public react to possible future changes to local government?

Diagnosing a problem is only the first step towards finding a solution, and in public policy the quest for a solution that is acceptable to the public, stakeholders and policymakers alike is often the most challenging part.

The Scottish Government launched its proposals for local government reform in late September 2026. These came as something of a surprise, as there had not been a clear indication prior to the 2026 Holyrood election that such widescale reform was on the table. The proposals currently being consulted on are not yet fully developed. However, from what we can gauge thus far the Scottish Government propose that there could be a return to a two-tier system of local government, similar to the structure that existed in Scotland prior to the last reorganisation by John Major's government, in 1996. This would comprise bigger regional authorities and larger numbers of community authorities underneath this.

4.1 Council Size

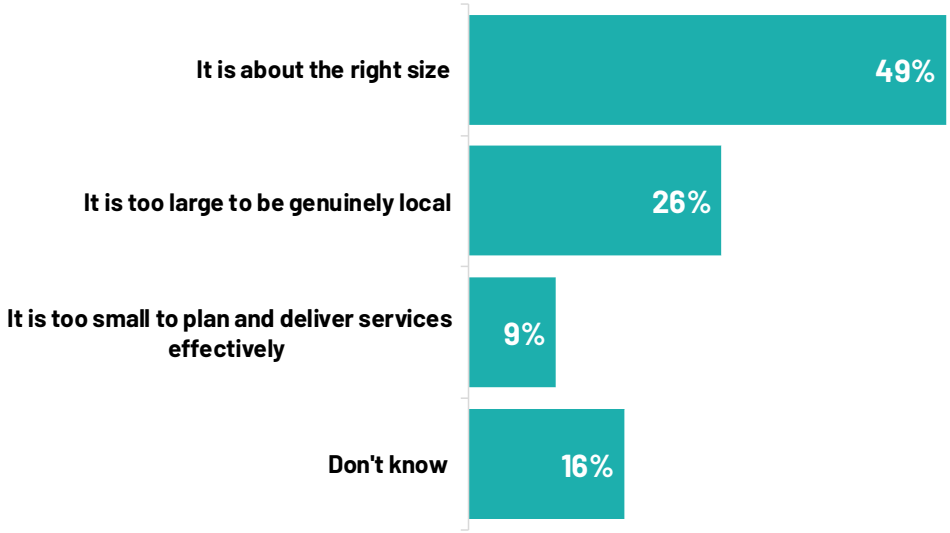
Part of the rationale for this reform, as set out by the Scottish Government, is that under the current unitary system of local government, individuals councils are either 'too large to be local or too small to be strategic'. As such, it has been suggested that between 6 and 10 regional councils would be established in Scotland, handling 'strategic' issues like education, transport, and economic growth. Meanwhile upwards of 120 new 'community' councils could sit underneath the strategic authorities and be responsible for local planning decisions, sport and leisure, greenspaces and other functions suited to more local control (Scottish Government 2026).

Do the Scottish public agree with the diagnosis that current councils are either 'too large to be local or too small to be strategic'? In fact, the most common view, shared by around half of Scots (49%) is that their current council is "about the right size" (Figure 4.1). Around a quarter (26%) say their council is "too large to be genuinely local" while only 9% say that it is too small to plan and deliver services effectively[1].

[1] Respondents were asked which comes closest to their view – that their local council is "too large to be genuinely local", "about the right size", or "too small to plan and deliver services effectively".

Figure 4.1: Views on size of local council

Thinking about the area covered by your local council, which of these comes closest to your view?



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults 16+, 18 – 28 September 2026
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

The proportion who say their council is 'about the right size' varies little by actual council geography or number of residents. This data suggests that, as much as policymakers and local councils might talk about the scale of current local authorities being an inhibitor of better decision-making and outcomes in local government, the message that the size of current local authorities is a key issue does not appear to resonate with the majority of people in Scotland. In part, this may be because of a reflexive preference for the status quo. Perhaps current boundaries are so embedded that it can be hard to imagine an alternative redrawing of the map of local government, without offering a concrete alternative proposal to the public.

Even so, it is notable that around a quarter (26%) of people view their local authority as being too large to be "genuinely local". Scotland is geographically large and, outside of the central belt, often sparsely populated. It is often remarked that Highland Council covers a land mass larger than the entirety of Wales. Indeed, we see that those living in rural areas are more likely (35%) than urban residents (24%) to think their local authority is too large.

Meanwhile, while only 9% overall say their council is too small to plan and deliver services effectively, this rises to 17% among those living in smaller council areas, with fewer than 100,000 residents.

However, we know from history that merging and splitting local authorities can be a source of tension and inflamed passions. When governments redraw maps, they need to account for a myriad of factors, including administrative resources, economic connectivity, social and historic boundaries and more. Even prior to the last reorganisation of local government in Scotland, there were warnings that the shift to unitary authorities would amount to 'gerrymandering' and

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purposeful division of wealthier suburbs from city centres to undermine once powerful regional councils like Strathclyde.

It is clear that there is still a debate to be had over what is the appropriate scale of local government in Scotland, and how a two-tier system might address this. From what the data tells us so far, Scots remain to be convinced of the need to redraw the map.

4.2 Elected Mayors

As mayoral devolution expands across England, recent years have also seen ongoing discussion about whether directly elected mayors could, and should, have a place in the political landscape in Scotland.

On one side of the debate, advocates of elected mayors argue that they could provide a clear, visible, and accountable leadership. For example, the Centre for Cities has proposed that a directly elected mayor for the Glasgow City Region would support more coordinated decision-making across transport, housing, skills and economic development and to strengthen the region's influence with national government. Advocates also argue that a mayor could provide a recognisable political figurehead for local government, particularly in a system where the use of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) has potentially made residents less able to identify a single local representative.

Critics, by contrast, argue that elected mayors could concentrate too much power in one person, encourage politics to focus on personalities rather than policies and decisions, and create an unnecessary additional layer of government. They also question whether the model would be suitable for Scotland's large, sparsely populated rural areas.

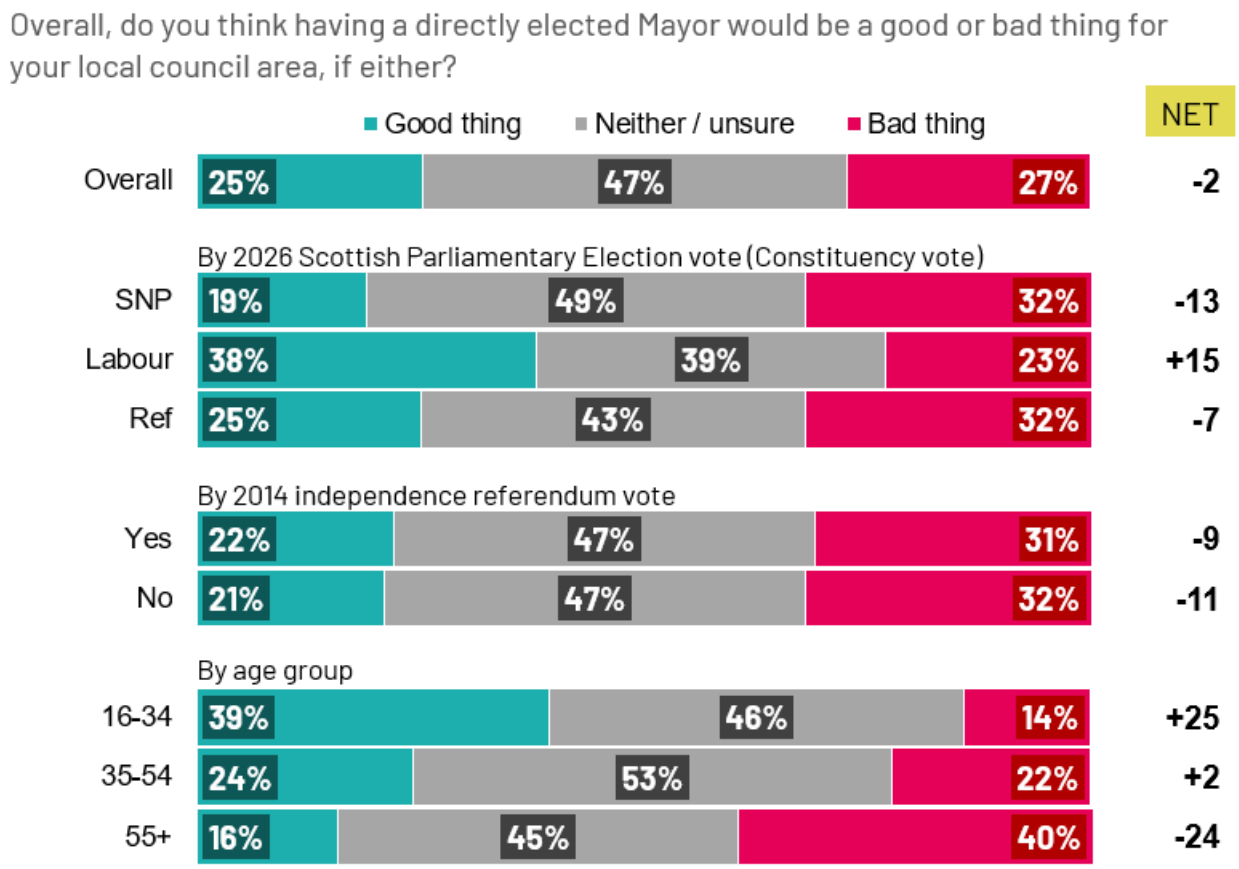
However, there is an important evidence gap in this debate: public attitudes towards directly elected mayors in Scotland remain largely unexplored.

In England, where fourteen strategic authorities now have directly elected mayors, recent Ipsos polling for the Local Government information Unit indicates that the general public now view directly elected Mayors more positively than negatively, with 42% saying they were a good thing and 12% a bad thing. Indeed, just under half (48%) of those polled in 2026 think that directly elected Mayors have had a positive impact on making local government more accountable to residents and giving the area a stronger voice in Westminster, while only one in ten think that mayors have had a negative impact on these aspects (10% and 9% respectively).

However, our new polling suggests that the Scottish public is currently more lukewarm on the prospect of directly elected mayors. Overall, the Scottish public is divided on whether mayors would be a good or a bad thing, with around a quarter aligning with each position (25% and 27% respectively), while a third (33%) saying that mayors would be neither good nor bad and a further 14% unsure (Figure 4.2).

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Figure 4.2: Views on directly elected Mayors



Base: 1,033 Online Scottish adults aged 16+, 18 - 28 September 2026, including 2026 Scottish Parliament Election SNP voters (319), Labour Party voters (176); Reform UK voters (105); 2014 Independence referendum 'Yes' voters (370), 2014 'No' voters (332); 16-34 year olds (291), 35-54 year olds (318), 55+ year olds (424).
Source: Ipsos Scotland Political Pulse

This relatively lukewarm response to directly elected mayors in Scotland is not without precedent. While strategic authority mayors are now an established feature of governance across much of England, public enthusiasm for directly elected council mayors has historically been more limited. In referendums held across 11 English cities in 2012, only Bristol voted to adopt a mayoral model, before later abolishing it in 2022. Scotland's current findings therefore appear broadly consistent with attitudes towards elected council mayors in England at that time.

However, some groups appear more positive towards the idea of elected mayors than others (Figure 4.2). As is the case in England, positive views of directly elected mayors are particularly high among younger cohorts and Labour voters.

Among Scots aged 16-34, around four in ten (39%) say that directly elected mayors would be a good thing for their local area, compared with 24% of those aged 35-54 and just 16% of those aged 55 and over. A similar pattern is seen in England, with younger people more supportive of mayors, though the overall levels of support in England are also higher across age groups. Just over half (52%) of those in England aged 16-34 say that a directly elected mayor is a good thing for their local area, compared with 43% of those aged 35-54 and 33% of those aged 55 and over.

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Labour voters on either side of the border are the most favourable towards the proposal. Among Scots who voted Labour in the 2026 Scottish Parliament election, the proportion saying mayors would be a good thing exceeds the proportion saying they would be a bad thing by 15 percentage points (38% compared with 23%). Among English respondents who voted Labour in the 2024 general election, support is even higher, with over half saying that mayors are a good thing (53%) and just 9% saying that they are a bad thing.

This higher support among Labour voters aligns with the position of their party, and could reflect greater familiarity or political affinity with mayoral models operating elsewhere in the UK, in particular the perceived success of Andy Burnham as Mayor of Greater Manchester,

By contrast, SNP voters are more likely to regard directly elected mayors as a bad rather than a good thing, producing a net score of –13. This is again broadly consistent with the position of the party. John Swinney has stated that he does not agree with the elected mayoral model, and instead favours stronger and more empowered local authorities.

Reform UK voters are also more likely to regard directly elected mayors as a bad rather than a good thing, with a net score of –7. However, in this case voters appear to be less closely aligned with the position of their party. Reform UK Scotland's 2026 manifesto committed the party to considering the viability of city mayors. Reform UK voters therefore appear somewhat less receptive to the idea than the party itself.

We also see differences in enthusiasm for directly elected mayors by region. Those living in the Glasgow Scottish Parliament region are the most likely to say that directly elected mayors would be a good thing for their council area (36%, vs 25% overall), while those living in the Highlands and Islands are least likely, at just 7%.

In part, this may reflect uncertainty around how a mayoral model would work across geographically dispersed areas and island communities. A significantly higher proportion of those living in the Highlands and Islands say that they do not know whether mayors would be good or bad (27%, vs. 14% overall). Conversely, as Scotland's largest city, Glasgow is often suggested as being a good fit for a regional mayor. The Glasgow conurbation also extends across several local authority areas, making it more comparable in this respect with Greater Manchester.

Other city-regions are not so obviously well suited to a metro-mayor. As has been argued elsewhere, city-regions in Scotland do not necessarily represent "meaningful geographies". The north of Fife, for example, is included in the Tay Cities Deal, while the south is included in the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal. Most Scottish city regions also have significantly smaller populations than even the smallest strategic authority in England.

Overall then, our findings suggest that support for directly elected mayors is not particularly high in Scotland. However, a key challenge is that mayoral systems are typically proposed at the city-region level, which is often presented as the most appropriate scale for their introduction. These structures, however, have limited public visibility, and levels of public awareness are likely to be

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low. For this reason, we examined attitudes towards a directly elected mayor for respondents' existing local council area, such as the City of Edinburgh Council. It is therefore uncertain whether respondents would view a mayor differently if the role were attached to a concrete larger regional authority, such as one of those envisaged under the Scottish Government's proposals for local governance reform.

More than anything, these findings reaffirm the challenges of applying a mayoral model developed for English devolution to a Scottish context. If the Glasgow city-region was to receive a mayor, this individual would represent a population around one third of the size of Scotland's, shifting the balance of political and economic power in Scotland. While this may bring benefits to Glasgow, there is a risk that this exacerbates existing feelings that the rest of Scotland outside of the central belt is often overlooked.

4.3 Summary

The findings in this chapter show a lack of strong support in Scotland for either resizing local councils or introducing elected mayors. The concluding chapter reflects on what this means for the Scottish Government's local government reform agenda.

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5 Conclusion

Our findings reveal a tension at the heart of local government reform in Scotland. There is an appetite for local areas to have greater control over their public services to respond to local needs, and more people support than oppose giving councils greater decision-making powers. Yet confidence in councils is relatively low: 52% are dissatisfied with the way their council runs things, and support for additional powers is weaker among those who are dissatisfied with current council performance.

This creates a challenging starting point for reform. Dissatisfaction with councils should not be interpreted as a mandate for any particular structural solution. The largest proportion of the public, 49%, think their council is about the right size, while opinion on directly elected mayors is divided. The research did not directly test the Scottish Government's emerging two-tier proposal for local government reform, so it cannot tell us whether the public supports or opposes that specific model. It does suggest, however, that there is no clear public demand for redrawing the local government map. Low satisfaction with council performance also means reformers will need to demonstrate that any new arrangements would be capable of using additional powers effectively.

While greater powers for local councils attract more public support than opposition, changes to structures and leadership will require a stronger public case. Any reform agenda must provide a much clearer account of the problems structural change would solve, which responsibilities should sit at which level, and what tangible improvements to services or accountability residents should expect as a result (and how and why these specific reforms make these more likely to be delivered). Successful reform will also require meaningful engagement with communities and an approach responsive to Scotland's varied local circumstances, recognising that what works in Glasgow may not work in Gairloch.

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Notes

- Ipsos interviewed a representative sample of 1,033 adults aged 16+ in Scotland online between 18-28 September 2026.
- Data are weighted to match the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error.

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