

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

14th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday 4
October 2023

Pre-Budget 2024-25 – Ministerial evidence

This briefing provides background detail and evidence to support the Committee's evidence session on pre-budget scrutiny on 4 October 2023.

Background

The Committee agreed on 6 September to undertake pre-budget scrutiny of the Scottish Government's budget for participative democracy in the form of an oral evidence session with the Minister for Parliamentary Business.

The Parliament's subject committees routinely undertake "pre-budget scrutiny" in September and October as part of the Parliament's established process for scrutiny of the Scottish Government's budget. Such scrutiny is informed by the Scottish Government's Medium-Term Financial Strategy, the forecasts of the Scottish Fiscal Commission and briefings provided by SPICe's Financial Scrutiny Unit. Subject committees have discretion as to the nature and extent of the prebudget scrutiny they undertake, informed by guidance provided by the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

Given its remit, the Public Petitions Committee has not generally participated in pre-budget scrutiny. However, the addition of the "citizen participation" element this session creates an option to do so in relation to Scottish Government spending on Citizens' Panels, in particular.

This paper sets out relevant budget detail, as well as linking to associated work and evidence taken by other committee which provides a wider context in the absence of this committee gathering stakeholder evidence.

Budget and engagement processes

In the 2023-24 Budget more widely, [the main Budget document](#) mentions consultation and participation only in passing. There was detail on a series of round-table discussions on the SG's plans for income tax, but this was linked from a separate document around attitudes to tax rather than the main document.

There is reference in the main Budget document and [Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement](#) (EFSBS) to other instances where policy development has, is, or will involve attempts to understand and reflect lived experience, including on updating the Public Sector Equality Duties process.

Other recent work

The SG's recent [Medium-Term Financial Strategy](#) refers to citizen engagement in the context of the Council Tax Reform Working Group's work and around tax policy, but no costs are associated with these (as is usual for the MTFs).

Members may recall that, [in its response](#) to the [Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy working group report](#), the Scottish Government expressed uncertainty about its ability to adopt some of the working group recommendations, citing budgetary pressures.

Budget processes

The [Budget Process Review Group's report](#), on which the current budget process is based recommended that:

- “The Scottish Government should consider what effective citizen engagement can be undertaken as part of the year-round budget cycle detailed in this report; and
- “The Scottish Government should consider how to improve the accessibility of budget information and citizen engagement with the budget process.”

Scottish Government Public Information and Engagement Budget 2023-24

It is not clear from the budget documents exactly how the engagement and participation activities of the Scottish Government are distributed and reflected across the Budget; however the Scottish Budget 2023-24 includes, on page 59 (Table 6.03), a “Level 3” entry for “public information and engagement”. This shows a reduced budget for 2023-24 of £2.3 million (compared with £2.8m in 2021-22 and £2.7m in 2022-23).

A longer-term overview is below:

£m	2013 -14	2014 -15	2015 -16	2016 -17	2017 -18	2018 -19	2019 -20	2020 -21	2021 -22	2022 -23	2023 -24
Public Information and Engagement	2.9	2.9	4.9	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.3

The Level 4 budget documents from 2018-19 onwards describe this Budget line as follows:

“The budget enables effective engagement with the public, partners and stakeholders to explain government policy; and to raise awareness, shift attitudes and change behaviours to improve and save people's lives by helping them to make informed choices.”

Until 2015-16 inclusive, the budget line was known as ‘Strategic Communications’ and sat within the Infrastructure, Investment and Cities portfolio. It moved to its current format/portfolio in 2016-17, but the description remained unchanged. This means that until 2017-18, the budget line was seen to allow the Scottish Government “to communicate to various audiences through traditional and digital channels. Activity includes research and evaluation, public information on legislation and signposting services.”

The increased budget shown in 2015-16 reflected additional funding to “support work to enhance the Scottish Government’s digital communications.”. The SG explained in the 2016-17 budget that “By driving through efficiencies and streamlining our approach to the way we run public information and behaviour change campaigns we will make significant savings to the Public Information and Engagement budget”.

In reality, aside from that single investment, the budget has remained largely static in cash terms over the last decade until a noticeable fall in 2023-24. In real terms (2023-24 prices), the budget for public information and engagement fell by £1.4 million between 2013-14 and 2023-24 (a real terms fall of 37.7%).

Updates from other Committee scrutiny and SPICe work

In order to better address that fact that many committees hear overlapping themes in Budget evidence, and to meet Convener’s Group aspirations around cross-cutting scrutiny, SPICe has committed to flagging cross-committee budget issues in briefing papers where possible.

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

For the past two years the EHRCJ Committee has looked at human rights budgeting. Last year this included identifying that the three principles of human rights budgeting – transparency, accountability, and participation - are a useful tool for budget presentation and scrutiny. This year, EHRCJ have begun a three-year approach to exploring these principles by looking at participation in-depth. This has included a broad [survey-based approach](#) to understand how the public interact with the budget and working with an intersectional community group through a deliberative process to better explore the impact of the Budget from a lived-experience perspective. The aim is to understand how well the budget process lends itself to public participation, and to apply this in future years.

For background reading and links on Human Rights Budgeting in the Scottish Budget, this SPICe Blog is useful:

[Guest blog: Does the Scottish Budget enable human rights? – SPICe Spotlight | Solas air SPICe \(spice-spotlight.scot\)](#)

Given the natural overlap in evidence themes, detail from the EHRCJ's evidence-gathering to date has been included in this paper for context.

Finance and Public Administration Committee

Members may wish to note the Finance and Public Administration's Committee's recent [inquiry report on Effective Scottish Government decision-making](#), which echoes many of the themes around transparency arising from the wider human right budgeting debate. Transparency is a key component of enabling participation in the budget process (and indeed, more widely).

SPICe cross-committee work

As part of its budget support last year, SPICe identified that there were several common and overlapping themes and witness groups across committees. SPICe analysis on this informed the FPAC Committee's guidance to subject committees of budget scrutiny. This was structured using the three principles of human rights budgeting, so there is a specific focus on participation within the analysis, which will be repeated after this years' pre-budget letters have been published.

The following SPICe blogs provide useful context and detail; both have sections dedicated to discussion of participation:

[The three golden rules? Mainstreaming transparency, participation and accountability in the Scottish Budget – SPICe Spotlight | Solas air SPICe \(spice-spotlight.scot\)](#)

[Budget Bingo – common themes in Committees' pre-budget scrutiny – SPICe Spotlight | Solas air SPICe \(spice-spotlight.scot\)](#)