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Spending on Top Civil Servants Rises as Public Satisfaction in Scotland Declines

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A record number of senior civil servants in Scotland are now earning six-figure salaries, despite widespread dissatisfaction with public services and ongoing cuts to key departments. Official figures published by the Scottish Government show that 73 individuals in the Senior Civil Service (SCS) are now on salaries exceeding £100,000, a sharp increase from 14 in 2018. The total wage bill for these top earners has now reached £8.6 million per year.

The SCS comprises high-level government employees, including directors general and heads of directorates overseeing policy areas such as health, education, the economy, and climate initiatives. According to the newly released list, the highest-paid civil servant is Caroline Lamb, Director General for Health and Chief Executive of NHS Scotland, with an annual salary between £205,000 and £209,000. Other notable earners include Alyson Stafford, Director General of the Scottish Exchequer (£160,000), and Joe Griffin, the new Permanent Secretary, who previously earned £140,000 as Director General of Strategy and External Affairs.

Despite the rising wage bill, recent polling suggests public confidence in services is waning. Research conducted by Ipsos found that 74 per cent of Scots believe public services have deteriorated over the past five years. More than half (62 per cent) blamed the Scottish Government directly, with the most serious concerns focused on healthcare, education, and policing. Specifically, 51 per cent expressed dissatisfaction with the National Health Service (NHS), while 28 per cent were unhappy with the state of schools, and 51 per cent felt policing had declined.

The surge in top-tier salaries comes at a time of financial tightening elsewhere. Earlier this year, Finance Secretary Shona Robison announced budget reductions affecting the NHS, mental health support, and transport infrastructure, citing “enormous and growing” fiscal pressure. Nevertheless, the number of high-paid civil servants has continued to climb, raising questions about government priorities.

Critics have pointed to what they describe as a bloated and increasingly remote civil service. The majority of SCS employees continue to work from home or follow hybrid arrangements introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. New guidance will soon require staff to attend offices at least twice per week, a measure that still falls short of the UK Government’s Whitehall standard, which mandates 60 per cent of time in the office. Some Scottish civil servants have pushed back, citing commuting costs, environmental concerns, and even claiming that the policy infringes on their “human rights.”

Absenteeism within the Scottish civil service has also reached unprecedented levels. In 2024, staff took an average of 8.7 sick days, more than double the rate seen in the private sector. The rise in absence rates and continued reliance on remote working have fuelled further criticism of civil service efficiency and accountability.

Scottish Conservative finance spokesman Craig Hoy said, “The civil service, and the cost of it, have ballooned out of control under the SNP’s watch, and by far the biggest expansion has been in those on the highest salaries. When Scots are paying the UK’s highest taxes but seeing worsening services, there’s no excuse for fat-cat pay packages of this sort.”

Echoing these concerns, Callum McGoldrick of the TaxPayers’ Alliance added, “At a time when public services are clearly under pressure, it’s hard to justify the steady growth in high-paid civil servants at the top of the Scottish Government. The focus should be on improving services for the public, not inflating the salaries bill in Holyrood.”

While the UK Government determines pay levels for SCS roles, decisions regarding the structure and size of the civil service in Scotland fall under the control of the devolved administration. In response to criticism, a Scottish Government spokesperson defended the pay structure, saying senior civil servants “bring significant expertise” and play a central role in delivering the government’s Programme for Government. They also pointed to a broader public service reform strategy intended to cut combined corporate costs by £1 billion over five years.

As questions grow over spending priorities and the delivery of essential services, the Scottish Government faces increasing scrutiny over its use of taxpayer funds and the expanding cost of bureaucracy at the top.