# Scotland’s public inquiries emerge as costly growth industry amid calls for reform



In recent years, Scotland has witnessed a remarkable increase in public inquiries, emerging as a significant fixture in the political landscape. These inquiries often serve as a refuge for politicians facing criticism, allowing them to defer accountability while investigations are underway. This trend has escalated to the extent where statutory inquiries appear to have become Scotland's primary growth industry, drawing scrutiny over their staggering costs to taxpayers.

The financial burden of these inquiries is profound, with the total expenditure soaring to £230 million. This figure is alarming, especially when considered in the context of Scotland’s tight public finances. As the Finance and Public Administration Committee of the Scottish Parliament initiates an examination into the economic impact of these inquiries, itstheir ability to deliver tangible benefits and lessons learned remains under debate. According to data, the Scottish government alone has spent £150.4 million on running costs for ongoing inquiries, while public bodies have additionally incurred costs of £36.4 million to participate. Notably, £3.3 million has been allocated for the salaries of inquiry chairs involved in the proceedings.

Several inquiries have captured public interest, most prominently the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, which has generated revelations that have stirred societal discourse. Launched a decade ago, it has incurred around £95.3 million in running costs, often lauded for its role in illuminating past abuses within various institutions. Yet, as inquiries prolong their timelines and inflate their budgets, many question their efficacy. The inquiry into the death of Sheku Bayoh, which has already cost approximately £24.8 million, typifies the situation where financial resources become entangled in lengthy bureaucratic processes, leaving stakeholders frustrated and the public disillusioned.

Other inquiries, such as those scrutinising the Covid-19 pandemic and hospital safety, have similarly racked up substantial costs. The ongoing scrutiny raises a crucial question: what alternatives might exist to ensure accountability without the financial drain? With many inquiries costing millions without delivering timely outcomes, the case for reform is becoming increasingly pressing. Professor Sandy Cameron, who previously chaired the Independent Jersey Care Inquiry, recently remarked to MSPs that “we need to think about other ways of achieving justice,” emphasising the urgent need for a reevaluation of the system.

The Scottish Parliament is beginning to take notice of the need for significant reform. The Finance and Public Administration Committee's forthcoming investigation seeks to assess the establishment and operation of public inquiries, their cost-effectiveness and potential spending controls. With historical data revealing that the UK and devolved governments have spent at least £1.5 billion on public inquiries since 1990, there exist compelling reasons for why such scrutiny is overdue. The sheer scale of public money spent, juxtaposed against the bureaucracy and perceived inefficiencies, foster growing discontent among taxpayers who find their financial contributions increasingly encumbered by the follies of government administration.

Inquiries have often been perceived as responses to political expediency rather than mechanisms of change. The trams debacle, which bled taxpayers dry to the tune of over £400 million amid systemic failings, remains a poignant example of how the inquiry system has faltered. Lord Hardie's inquiry unearthed a plethora of mismanagement issues, yet many believe that the findings merely sit “on ministers’ shelves gathering dust,” as he lamented.

The study of how inquiries are managed and funded could pave the way for more cost-efficient and potentially less cumbersome methods of achieving accountability. As Scotland grapples with the challenges of governance and public trust, the rise of inquiries raises a broader conversation about the nature of public accountability—one that demands urgent attention, lest taxpayers continue to bear the heaviest burdens of bureaucratic delay and mismanagement.

The pressing needs emerging from the inquiries underscore an underlying truth: a more judicious approach to governance may lead to fewer inquiries, thus saving significant public funds and restoring faith in the political system. For the time being, however, it appears the bill for public incompetence will only escalate as inquiries become increasingly entrenched in Scotland's political narrative.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14751399/GRAHAM-GRANT-Welcome-Scotlands-biggest-growth-industry-inquiries-cost-taxpayers-millions-pounds.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy4nnynq28o)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14751399/GRAHAM-GRANT-Welcome-Scotlands-biggest-growth-industry-inquiries-cost-taxpayers-millions-pounds.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/ongoing-scottish-inquiries-have-cost-over-ps186m)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.parliament.scot/about/news/news-listing/committee-examines-cost-effectiveness-of-public-inquiries), [[4]](https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/holyroods-finance-committee-to-examine-cost-effectiveness-of-public-inquiries)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.covid19inquiry.scot/inquiry-costs), [[7]](https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/msps-launch-probe-into-public-inquiries-amid-concerns-over-significant-costs-5066496)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14751399/GRAHAM-GRANT-Welcome-Scotlands-biggest-growth-industry-inquiries-cost-taxpayers-millions-pounds.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14751399/GRAHAM-GRANT-Welcome-Scotlands-biggest-growth-industry-inquiries-cost-taxpayers-millions-pounds.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy4nnynq28o> - This article reports that nearly £200 million of public money has been spent on four public inquiries currently taking place in Scotland. The Scottish government has paid £150.4 million in running costs, with an additional £36.4 million spent by public bodies participating in the inquiries. The article also highlights that £3.3 million has been spent on the salaries of those chairing the inquiries, which are examining the Covid crisis, hospital safety, child abuse, and the death of Sheku Bayoh. Questions have been raised about the cost-effectiveness of these inquiries, but the Scottish government stated they provide important opportunities to establish facts and learn lessons.
3. <https://www.parliament.scot/about/news/news-listing/committee-examines-cost-effectiveness-of-public-inquiries> - The Scottish Parliament's Finance and Public Administration Committee has announced an investigation into the cost-effectiveness of public inquiries in Scotland. This is the first time a Holyrood committee has examined the matter in depth. The investigation will consider how and why public inquiries are established, whether they deliver value for money, the extent to which spending controls are necessary, and alternatives to the current model of public inquiries.
4. <https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/holyroods-finance-committee-to-examine-cost-effectiveness-of-public-inquiries> - The Finance and Public Administration Committee of the Scottish Parliament is set to examine the cost-effectiveness of public inquiries in Scotland. This marks the first in-depth examination of statutory public inquiries by a Holyrood committee. The investigation will focus on how and why public inquiries are established, whether they deliver value for money, the necessity of spending controls, and potential alternatives to the current model of public inquiries.
5. <https://www.scottishlegal.com/articles/ongoing-scottish-inquiries-have-cost-over-ps186m> - This article reports that over £186 million has been spent on the four public inquiries currently underway in Scotland. Data obtained by the BBC reveals that £150.4 million has been spent on running costs, while public bodies have spent £36.4 million to participate. The majority of the costs are associated with the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, which has accumulated £85 million in running costs and £24.9 million in participants' costs.
6. <https://www.covid19inquiry.scot/inquiry-costs> - The Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry has been publishing its costs on a quarterly basis since March 2022. Funding for the Inquiry is provided by the Scottish Government, but the Inquiry operates independently. The costs include staffing, procuring infrastructure such as IT systems, equipment and premises, witness expenses, and payments towards core participants' legal representation. The Inquiry's final costs will be published at its close once all invoices have been received and settled.
7. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/msps-launch-probe-into-public-inquiries-amid-concerns-over-significant-costs-5066496> - Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) have launched an investigation into the cost-effectiveness of public inquiries in Scotland amid concerns over significant expenditures. The Finance and Public Administration Committee will examine whether public inquiries represent value for money, the necessity of spending controls, and potential alternatives to the current model. Between 1990 and 2024, the UK and devolved governments spent at least £1.5 billion on completed public inquiries, according to the Institute for Government.