

RSE

*The Royal Society
of Edinburgh*

KNOWLEDGE MADE USEFUL

Policy in practice: How Scotland can get it right





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Executive summary

As Scotland approaches the 2026 election, public confidence in politics is declining. This erosion of trust risks deepening political disillusionment and polarisation at a time when democratic values are already under threat. Simultaneously, Scotland continues to face persistent poverty and inequality, growing pressures on public services, a housing emergency, and an accelerating climate and biodiversity crisis. Ambition is not in short supply, but evidence points to a recurring gap between intention and implementation, which further weakens trust and limits progress.

It is in this context that the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) convened multidisciplinary expert workgroups, drew on published research, and engaged the public to examine the issues the electorate identify as most important: the economy; health and social care; immigration and asylum; housing; education and skills; and the environment. These issues are intrinsically interconnected and cannot be addressed in isolation. They require coordinated, long-term approaches that are grounded in evidence and realistic about constraints.

This paper presents our proposal for doing policy differently – shifting from paternalism to partnership; from the short-term to the long-term; from systems that merely help people survive to ones that enable them to thrive; and from rhetoric to delivery.

Hence, the paper calls for: whole-system economic reform linking inclusive growth in Scotland's foundational economy with its growth sectors and a tax system fit for long-term public service delivery; a preventative shift in public health placing mental health, wellbeing, and equity at the centre of decision-making; a coordinated, cross-government migration and integration framework grounded in transparent data and place-based labour planning; cross-party agreement on housing to ensure long-term supply, affordability, and decarbonisation; a coherent national strategy for education and skills aligned with Scotland's wider priorities; and a cross-party charter to meet statutory climate and biodiversity targets, halting biodiversity decline by 2030, and restoring nature by 2045.

Across all areas, effective policy delivery depends on clearer ownership of outcomes, credible fiscal planning, cross-party stability, and transparent acknowledgement of trade-offs. Without this shift, new strategies will continue to outpace delivery capacity, and commitments will outnumber meaningful changes. The paper concludes that Scotland must move from policy to practice.

This paper is not a manifesto. Instead, it offers an evidence-based framework to strengthen governance and rebuild trust, consistent with the RSE's founding commitment to reasoned and evidenced debate. Meaningful change will require political leaders to make difficult choices, explain them honestly, and focus on outcomes. When policy delivers tangible improvements to people's lives and strengthens confidence in Scotland's democratic institutions, we will know we are getting it right.



Why now and why the RSE?

Scotland faces mounting challenges in 2026 and beyond. Poverty and inequality persist, there is a deepening housing crisis, and public services are under severe strain - not only from rising demand linked to an ageing population, but also from long-term neglect and a failure to invest in, localise, and modernise the systems on which people rely. These pressures are experienced and addressed across multiple levels of government, national and local, and often in partnership with the private and third sectors, which together shape how policy is delivered in practice. At the same time, climate, biodiversity, and economic transitions require clear and deliverable action. For too long, bold ambitions have been met with multiple, often evidence-light strategies, patchy delivery, and fragmented accountability across the system.

We need to seize what is a generational opportunity – Scotland can build a more resilient future through the clean energy transition, technological innovation, public sector reform, nature recovery and a host of other developments. Realising this potential will require moving beyond aspiration to coordinated delivery, long-term investment, and skills development across all regions. The Scottish Government's Innovation Strategy¹ sets a clear ambition for Scotland to become the most innovative small country in the world, but success will depend on sustained commitment, clear priorities, and delivery of measurable outcomes.

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is using its independent voice and multidisciplinary expertise to champion a different kind of politics: stronger delivery mechanisms, better regional decision-making where it makes sense, and clearer public accountability. The focus is on evidence-informed aims that name who is responsible for delivery, and how progress can be measured, so people can see real improvements in their lives. The RSE is ideally placed to initiate such a discussion in Scotland. We were founded nearly 250 years ago in the midst of the Scottish Enlightenment².

We reflected the newfound Enlightenment values based on the premise that authority does not derive from power and titles but from the ability to sustain one's case with evidence and a reasoned argument.

This is a process in which we can all participate in on an equal footing. We hold deep respect for the truth, and equally in using truth to improve the lot of everyone. This is still reflected in our mission: "knowledge made useful".

This paper sets out how policy in Scotland is currently delivered and how this needs to improve if the political process is to re-engage the public. In doing so, it recognises that while national policy direction is set by the Scottish Parliament and Government, delivery capacity also rests with local authorities and their partners across the public, private and third sectors. The sections that follow consider five of the key issues for voters identified by the Scottish Opinion Monitor (Scoop), the Scottish Election Study's regular opinion poll based on a representative sample of Scottish voting-age adults.³ These priority concerns (the economy; health and social care; immigration and asylum; housing; and education and skills) are examined through the lens of doing policy differently, exploring how this approach could shape responses to each issue and illustrating what it might look like in practice. To the above issues we add the environment as it is central to all policy areas and is underpinned by a pressing need to address the rapid change in our climate and loss of biodiversity. Unless we can mitigate and reverse these changes, their consequences will continue to multiply. The recently published UK Government's national security assessment on global biodiversity loss⁴ points to a potential collapse in resilience, security and prosperity.

1 Scottish Government(2023). *National innovation strategy 2023 to 2033*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-national-innovation-strategy/>

2 RSE. (n.d.). *History*. <https://rse.org.uk/about-us/history/>

3 Scottish Election Study. (2025). *SCOOP Monitor*. <https://scottishelections.ac.uk/scoop-monitor/>.

4 UK Government. (2026). *Nature security assessment on global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-security-assessment-on-global-biodiversity-loss-ecosystem-collapse-and-national-security>

These issues are framed explicitly through the lens of voter concern – rather than academic disciplines, institutional remits, or sectoral interests – reflecting the priorities that most strongly shape how people vote. This framing recognises a core democratic reality: political attention is significantly driven by voter priorities.⁵ If evidence-based policy is to influence debate in the run-up to the 2026 election, it must be presented in ways that connect directly to those priorities. Public feedback and engagement indicate that many citizens feel a disconnect between their concerns and policy outcomes, contributing to declining trust in political institutions. Therefore, this paper adopts a doing policy differently approach. Drawing on evidence already published by the RSE and other specialist organisations, it calls for policy approaches that are grounded in evidence, realistically deliverable, and supported by clear mechanisms of accountability.

Additionally, the RSE convened three thematic workgroups on economic prosperity, social cohesion and inclusion, and environmental sustainability, which comprised RSE Fellows, Young Academy of Scotland, and external experts, who met regularly to share their expertise and inform this paper. By organising existing knowledge around the issues voters care most about, this paper seeks to make expertise both politically relevant and practically useful for future politicians and policymakers.

Three points to note:

- 1) The RSE is not a political party, and this paper is not intended as an alternative manifesto. Rather, it seeks to encourage a politics that confronts intricate realities with honesty and clarity.
- 2) Although various calls to action (and policy options in the appendix) are presented, based on available evidence, the paper does not claim to have all the answers. This paper's objective is to prompt a conversation that we hope will engage the widest possible range of voices across Scotland.
- 3) The issues confronting Scotland are complex and only growing in intensity. Rising disillusionment, combined with growing pressures in daily life, create space for extreme voices that challenge and are harmful to the very principles Scotland's democracy is built upon: openness, inclusivity, tolerance, and decency. These uncomfortable truths must be confronted in a sincere and non-judgmental way if any of the changes outlined in this paper are to take hold.

The 2026 election: Choices, trade-offs and priorities

Elections – and indeed, the policies of any future government – are about choices, trade-offs, and priorities. For the next Scottish Government, there will be enduring challenges to overcome as well as new opportunities to seize. Many of these will fall into one of three categories, reflecting the RSE's own strategic agenda: Economic prosperity, environmental sustainability and climate, and social cohesion and inclusion. Although these themes may come as no surprise, there is often still disagreement on how they should be addressed. This highlights the need for evidence-based, responsible, and constructive debate, which this document aims to inspire.

Economic prosperity

Scotland's economy faces persistent low productivity, regional inequalities, and economic leakage when potentially high-value local enterprises are bought by multinationals. It also continues to underperform relative to the UK and other developed economies, showing low growth in recent years.⁶ Without a radical improvement to Scotland's economy, it will be increasingly difficult to create a tax base – and corresponding tax returns – to fund even the current level of public services. In 2026-27, as a result of the slower growth of the Scottish economy relative to the rest of the UK, Scotland's taxpayers will pay £1,754m more tax than their counterparts in the rest of the UK, though this will only bring in £969m more to the Scottish budget.⁷ Just under £800m is lost due to what the Scottish Fiscal Commission calls Scotland's 'tax base performance gap'. This has grown from £540m in 2020-21.⁸ An ageing workforce and skills gaps in key sectors such as renewable energy, digital innovation, and social care further threaten productivity and public service resilience. Scotland has untapped potential in advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative industries, life sciences, and financial services,⁹ but realising it will require innovative policies,¹⁰ workforce planning, and collaboration between academia, industry, and government. Politicians need to prioritise plans to deliver growth and monitor and report on its wider impacts.

Tax and spending

The Scottish Government's choices on tax and spending are shaped by a complex funding system,¹¹ combining devolved tax raising and borrowing powers with a block grant from the UK Government. Whatever the mechanics, public finances are under increasing strain, with the government's own forecasts showing a funding gap of around £4.7 billion by 2030.¹²

Health and social care spending is the largest part of the Scottish budget, and highest in relation to people aged over 60. It is anticipated that by 2030, health and social care spending will account for 40% of public spending, placing further demands on an already limited public purse. At the same time, as an answer to this deficit, the government has made ambitious assumptions about efficiency savings and tight public sector pay growth, especially in health, which will be difficult to deliver.¹³ It is also using sources of revenue, such as from Crown Estate (mostly coming from the ScotWind leasing programme),¹⁴ to support day-to-day spending.

The Scottish Government must find a more sustainable way to improve its financial picture.¹⁵ This necessarily involves balancing limited funding from the fiscal framework, borrowing powers, and the block grant with rising demands on health, social care, and other services. Clear, resilient, and transparent fiscal plans are essential, including considering all tax (including Council Tax) options, making strategic investments offering longer term sustainable returns, and avoiding¹⁶ short-term measures that defer hard choices.

6 House of Commons Library. (2026). *Regional and national economic indicators*. SN06924). <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/SN06924/>.

7 Scottish Parliament. (2026). *Scottish Budget 2026-27*. SB 26-04. <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/research-prepared-for-parliament/research-briefings/2026/1/16/sb-2604/pdf>.

8 Scottish Fiscal Commission. (2026). *Scotland's Economic and Fiscal Forecasts – January 2026*. <https://fiscalcommission.scot/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Scotlands-Economic-and-Fiscal-Forecasts-January-2026-revised-13-01-2026.pdf>.

9 UK Government. (2025). *Industrial Strategy Sector Definitions List*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy/industrial-strategy-sector-definitions-list>

10 Malik, P. (2025). *Scaling up: Building a vibrant ecosystem for a thriving economy*. <https://rse.org.uk/resource/scaling-up-building-a-vibrant-ecosystem-for-a-thriving-economy/>

11 RSE. (2025). *The financing of the Scottish Government*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/the-financing-of-the-scottish-government/>.

12 Scottish Government. (2025). *Scotland's Fiscal Outlook: Scottish Government's Medium-Term Financial Strategy*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-fiscal-outlook-scottish-governments-medium-term-financial-strategy-3/>.

13 Scottish Fiscal Commission (2026). *Scotland's Economic and Fiscal Forecasts – January 2026*, <https://www.fiscalcommission.scot/publications/scotlands-economic-and-fiscal-forecasts-january-2026/>.

14 Scottish Fiscal Commission. (2026). *Budget and Spending Review underscore tight fiscal outlook as Scottish Government plans efficiencies and reform*. <https://fiscalcommission.scot/budget-and-spending-review-underscore-tight-fiscal-outlook-as-scottish-government-plans-efficiencies-and-reform/>.

15 Audit Scotland. (2025) *Short term measures not addressing gap in public sector finances*. <https://audit.scot/news/short-term-measures-not-addressing-gap-in-public-sector-finances>.

16 Audit Scotland (2025).

Education and skills

Scottish education is undergoing significant transformation; most recently, the Education (Scotland) Act (2025)¹⁷ established Qualifications Scotland, while also creating a new office, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland. The RSE has previously argued that surface-level changes to education bodies cannot substitute for the foundational cultural change required to develop a future-facing education and skills system.¹⁸ Transforming education and training is central to economic and social wellbeing and achieving Scotland's wider objectives. This must be driven not only by policy narratives, but also by the respective actions taken to deliver them. It is also important to recognise that a more consequential reform agenda is being advanced through the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) Bill,¹⁹ at a time when college and university finances are increasingly precarious across the sector. In this context, funding and governance reform may prove far more significant for system outcomes than institutional rebranding alone.

Significantly, Scotland remains committed to an ambitious programme of decarbonisation and nature recovery and protection. Achieving underlying targets requires a transformational increase in the number of people trained and employed in key jobs. However, "green skills" shortages continue to be a problem. This illustrates the importance of effectively linking national priorities to decisions taken at the delivery level – from careers advice and subject choices to articulation between different stages of the learner journey (e.g. school to college, college to university, or into apprenticeships, etc.).²⁰ Therefore, improving the "absorption rates" in the education system, from education into productive employment, is a key enabler of both individual and economic prosperity.

Environmental sustainability and climate change

Scotland is globally committed to be a net-zero nation²¹ by 2045, balancing greenhouse gas emissions with removals to combat global warming, through its Climate Change Plan.²² To do this, a radical transformation is needed across land use, buildings, transport, and energy policy to support carbon budget trajectories.

The energy transition can be a catalyst for regional revitalisation and upskilling for net-zero jobs. Crucially, this must be aligned with the principles of a just transition, ensuring that people and places are not left behind in the shift to a greener, more circular economy - while also maximising opportunities for economic growth.

Embracing environmental support systems – the natural processes, resources, and ecological infrastructure such as clean air and water, healthy soils, marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and vital life forms – should galvanise major transformational change to enhance ecosystems' health and protection. Investing in climate resilient infrastructure, healthy natural systems, and public understanding is essential to reduce the far higher economic and social costs of inaction, such as extreme weather impacts on homes and energy bills to long-term damage to soils, marine ecosystems, and livelihoods. We also cannot overlook the human element. People need to understand how to adapt to a changing climate and contribute to a just transition, underscoring the importance of effective outreach.

17 Scottish Parliament. (2025). *Education (Scotland) Act 2025*. 2025 asp 11. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2025/11/contents/enacted>.

18 RSE. (2023). *Education Bill provision consultation*. AP23-15. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/education-bill-provisions-consultation/>

19 Scottish Parliament. (2026). *Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill* <https://www.parliament.scot/bills-and-laws/bills/s6/tertiary-education-and-training-funding-and-governance-scotland-bill>.

20 RSE. (2025). *Gaps, overlaps and challenges: assessing the alignment of Scotland's education reform agenda with national priorities*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/gaps-overlaps-and-challenges-education-reform-report/>

21 Scottish Government. (2026). *Climate Change*. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/climate-change/>

22 Scottish Government. (2025). *Scotland's Climate Change Plan – 2026-2040*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-climate-change-plan-2026-2040/>

Social cohesion and inclusion

Scotland's Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy²³ sets out a framework for the Scottish Government and the public sector at large to embed equality and human rights across all their work. However, social cohesion cannot be achieved through policy intent alone. It depends on how policies are delivered, who holds power in decision-making, and whether adequate resources are in place to enable meaningful participation.

Across Scotland, rising inequality, most acute and persistent in the places that deindustrialisation left behind, where insecure incomes, and underinvestment in social infrastructure, are driving violence and disengagement as well as eroding political trust (Coid et al., 2021). Divides in current and potential wellbeing between younger and older Scots now generate tensions too. Social division and reducing social mobility are not borne out of misunderstanding or a lack of empathy, but of unequal outcomes resulting from overlapping structural inequalities (e.g. due to disability, race, gender, class, etc.) that limit people's ability to participate fully in social, economic, and political life (Francis, 2025).

Any future Scottish Government will need to move beyond rhetorical commitments to empathy and inclusion and instead make deliberate political choices: prioritising equality of outcomes, investing in income security and public services, working across government portfolios, as well as reforming funding and commissioning models that currently undermine the third sector's role in sustaining social cohesion. Without these choices, efforts to bring people together risk placing responsibility on communities themselves, rather than addressing the structural conditions (e.g. inequality, poverty, digital exclusion, poor housing, etc.) that continue to leave many feeling excluded from Scotland's future. This challenge is compounded by polarising and binary narratives in social and mainstream media, which can entrench division and undermine constructive public dialogue (Vasist, Chatterjee and Krishnan, 2023).

Importance of evidence-based policy

Across each of these challenges and opportunities, greater emphasis should be placed on cross-governmental evidence-based policy, supported by realistic delivery plans. However, evidence does not operate in a political vacuum. The generation, interpretation, and use of evidence are often shaped (and at times distorted) by political priorities and media narratives. As a result, even where there is a strong and well-established evidence base for action, political pressures can delay, dilute, or derail implementation. Recognising and addressing this gap between evidence and decision-making is therefore essential to achieving meaningful and sustained policy change. Evidence from successful interventions,²⁴ such as the Scottish Child Payment²⁵ and targeted crime reduction initiatives,²⁶ demonstrate that progress is possible when priorities are clearly defined, enough resources are allocated, and delivery is sustained over time. These examples reinforce a central message of this paper: outcomes improve not simply with ambition, but when choices are made and followed through.

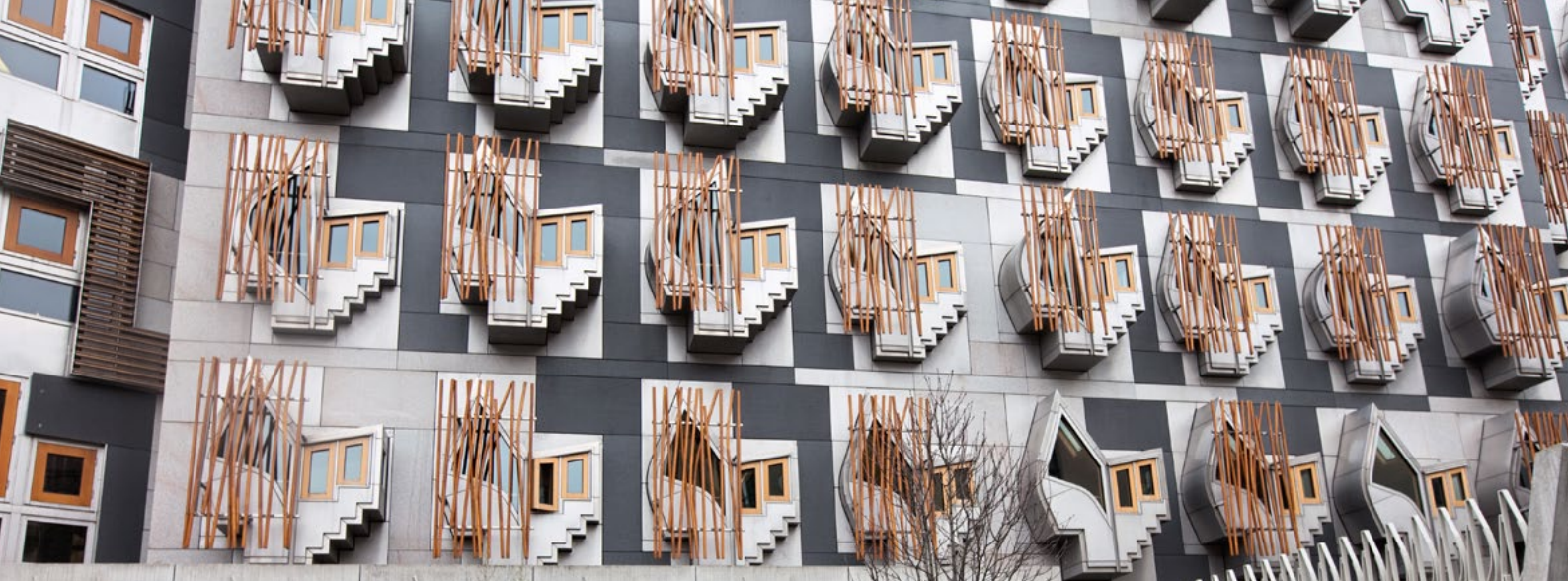
It is imperative that the next Scottish Government, with the cooperation of all parties and MSPs, establishes long-term, cross-party frameworks for policy alignment, transparency, and continuous evaluation across key portfolios. This addresses the false starts, siloed policymaking, and short-termism that hinder investment, delivery, and public trust.

23 Scottish Government. (2025). *Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy*. <https://consult.gov.scot/equality-and-human-rights/equality-and-human-rights-mainstreaming/>

24 LSE. (2025). *Deprivation prevented by introduction of Scottish child payment, first cross-nation study finds*. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/news/deprivation-prevented-by-introduction-of-scottish-child-payment-first-cross-nation-study-finds>

25 Scottish Government. (2024). *Families across Scotland benefit from over £1billion in social security support*. <https://www.gov.scot/news/families-across-scotland-benefit-from-over-1billion-in-social-security-support/>

26 Brooks, L. (2024). How a pioneering Scottish violence reduction unit achieved radical change. *The Guardian*, 25 February 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/25/scottish-violence-reduction-unit-radical-change>



How should we do policy differently?



1. From paternalism to partnership:

Too frequently, politics is experienced as something imposed upon people, rather than undertaken with them.

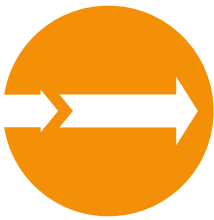
Doing policy differently requires a transition from paternalism and top-down governance to a process of partnership, driven by meaningful engagement and co-production with all sections of the community from start to finish.



2. From surviving to thriving:

Democratic participation is about more than casting a vote. It is about ensuring that people have the ability, resources, and information to participate meaningfully in decision-making and self-organise in the pursuit of change.

Effective democratic politics creates the conditions in which every individual can thrive, ensuring that individuals and groups have access to the information, tools, and resources necessary to participate meaningfully in decision-making and to organise themselves in pursuit of shared goals.



3. From short-term to long-term:

Political decision-making is often constrained by short electoral cycles and the immediacy of the news cycle. The difficulty is compounded where the costs of intervention are immediate, while the benefits accrue only over time. Addressing systemic challenges requires sustained investment and foresight.

Climate change illustrates this concept: as extreme weather intensifies, consequences cascade across systems – migration patterns shift, food production falters, disease burdens rise, energy security is undermined, and security risks proliferate. Adopting a holistic and forward-looking approach can ensure complex challenges are effectively addressed.



4. From rhetoric to delivery:

As we have seen, doing policy differently depends upon partnership, tolerance, thriving, and a sustained, long-term perspective. But none of these processes will succeed unless rhetoric becomes reality. Research suggests that political disillusionment can stem from perceptions that candidates face pressures to make ambitious commitments during campaigns which prove difficult to sustain or fully implement once in office (Rose and Wessels, 2019). Thus, what is required is less talk about “what” will be done and more talk about “how” it will be done.

Delivery requires honesty about choices and priorities, about what can and what cannot be delivered. Trade-offs are inevitable, and winners and losers will emerge. This makes it more important that decisions are made with public input.

Scotland is an ambitious nation, but too often its strategies have failed to deliver real change. The problem is not ideas or resources. Instead, it is governance, delivery, and the appetite for risk when it comes to delivering policies.



From principles to policies to practice

This section applies the four principles outlined above (partnership; thriving; long-termism; and delivery) to the five policy areas of greatest public concern; ranked in order of priority according to Scottish Opinion Monitor (Scottish Election Study, 2025).



Economy



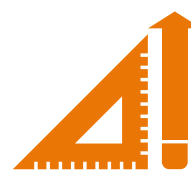
Health and social care



Immigration and asylum



Housing



Education and skills



Environment

We include the environment as its impacts are far reaching, from environmental stability to human wellbeing, to economic sustainability. Each of these priorities aligns with one or more of the three societal challenges recognised by the RSE – economic prosperity, social cohesion and inclusion, and environmental sustainability and climate change. All of them are interconnected. For example, education supports economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental action; housing and health policies advance social cohesion while shaping economic and environmental outcomes; and environmental considerations influence every priority area. Recognising these interconnections underscores the need for joined-up, evidence-based policymaking that addresses systemic challenges holistically.

Each priority area is discussed under the four principles of partnership, thriving, long-termism, and delivery, followed by a call to action that any future government should prioritise. More detailed policy options for each priority area are listed in the Appendix.



The economy

Scotland's economy is a human-made system shaped by choices, institutional design, and power dynamics. Economic outcomes in Scotland are not inevitable, but the result of long-term structural decisions affecting income distribution, productivity, regional development, and access to opportunity. Fragmented governance and siloed decision-making have constrained Scotland's ability to respond effectively to complex, cross-cutting challenges such as low productivity growth, regional imbalance, and rising demand for public services (van Ark et al., 2025). In an increasingly globalised economy, Scottish economic policy must be both responsive to international market conditions and grounded in local realities (Waite et al., 2025), shaped not only by government but by citizens, businesses, and institutions across Scotland.



Paternalism to partnership

Economic policy is often created through top-down processes which result in siloed policymaking and weak delivery. A partnership approach recognises that economic outcomes are shaped by the combined actions of households, communities, businesses, the third sector, and government along with external disruptors (e.g. technological changes, geopolitical instabilities, and wider global market conditions). When designing policy that seeks to address economic challenges, it is important to understand what factors are driving these challenges and work with the right stakeholders – whether that be individuals, employers, landowners, third sector organisations, or community groups – to develop the right solutions. As the RSE has highlighted, these challenges range from economic inactivity to skills gaps within growing industries, to the need to reconcile regional ambitions with local delivery.²⁷

Without listening to business, how can we ensure our education strategy takes account of the skills needed in the future economy and that learners pursue these? And without hearing from our local communities, how can we ensure that regional development strategies will include the infrastructure needed to support local economic development and meet community needs? Without listening to people, communities, and healthcare providers, how can we create policies that support the health and wellbeing of our workforce?

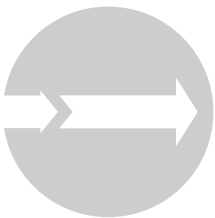


Surviving to thriving

Surviving in an economy where a significant proportion of people and businesses are struggling to make ends meet is one that needs repair. The RSE has recently been investigating the drivers of slow productivity in Scottish businesses and how policymakers can support growth in Scotland.²⁸ When we discuss productivity, what we mean is “how to optimally use resources to produce better outcomes for people, firms and the economy.” Productivity is a key driver of economic growth, and if we can achieve an improvement in productivity, it can help alleviate current challenges, including, creating more sustainable businesses and higher paid jobs, generating more tax revenue to improve public services, reducing the current tax burden on individuals and businesses, and helping to reduce the cost of living.

On a macro-level, low productivity is driven by chronic, broad-based underinvestment in businesses, infrastructure (e.g. housing and transport), and human capital (health, education, skills); a lack of knowledge diffusion i.e. passing knowledge from more productive firms to less productive firms; and institutional fragmentation.²⁹ On a micro-level, many domestic firms struggle with ambitious leadership, people management, and data-driven operational management. Within Scottish Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) there is often a narrow focus on day-to-day operations with limited strategic thinking, with firms prioritising short-term survival over long-term growth.

Scotland’s economy can be redesigned to thrive by building on existing strengths, promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, and embedding wellbeing as a core economic objective rather than a by-product of growth.³⁰



Short-term to long-term

Short-term policy cycles and fragmented delivery limit progress on long-standing challenges such as inequality, low productivity, and regional imbalance. Evidence indicates that sustained improvements in economic participation and resilience depend on long-term investment in the foundational economy (the goods and services we use every day) – including skills, housing, transport, health, and care – supported by policy stability and multi-year funding.³¹ Without effective long-term planning and cross-government coordination, policy risks prioritising short-term gains over inclusive and sustainable growth.

Long-term economic success also requires prosperity to be more widely shared. Inequality constrains participation and productivity, particularly through its impacts on health and education, reducing lifetime earnings, weakening labour market outcomes, and increasing pressure on public services. Addressing inequality alongside productivity is therefore not a trade-off but a prerequisite for sustainable growth. Evidence shows that growth-first approaches reliant on “trickle-down” effects have failed to deliver broad-based improvements in living standards.³²

A credible long-term strategy must be underpinned by fiscal sustainability. The RSE has highlighted misalignment within Scotland’s current tax framework, including limited returns from the Advanced Rate of Scottish Income Tax³³ and the risks of relying too narrowly on income tax to fund rising public service pressures.³⁴ While devolved powers are constrained, a broader and more coherent approach to taxation – aligned with long-term economic strategy and public spending priorities – must remain on the governmental agenda to avoid continued reliance on short-term fiscal fixes and to sustain essential public services.

28 RSE. (2025). *Productivity – the micro dimension*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/productivity-the-micro-dimension/>

29 RSE. (2024). *The power of strategic productivity*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/the-power-of-productivity/>

30 RSE. (2024). *Efficiency and equity: Mapping the landscape of economic wellbeing in Scotland*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/efficiency-and-equity-mapping-the-landscape-of-economic-wellbeing-in-scotland/>

31 RSE (2024).

32 RSE (2024).

33 A tax band that targets higher earners - it is a 45% tax band introduced in the 2024/25 tax year, applying to annual income between £75,001 and £125,140.

34 RSE. (2024). *Managing Scotland’s Public Finances: A Strategic Approach*. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2025/07/common-understanding-2025/documents/common-understanding-2025-working-together-people-scotland/common-understanding-2025-working-together-people-scotland/govscot%3Adocument/common-understanding-2025-working-together-people-scotland.pdf>



Rhetoric to delivery

Scotland does not lack economic ambition, but persistent delivery gaps are weakening public trust. Moving from rhetoric to measurable action is essential if national targets (e.g. on child poverty, net-zero, and growth) are to be met. Requiring annual Audit Scotland delivery reviews, ministerial responses in Parliament, and clear public tracking of who delivers what by when would ensure that Scotland's economic policy is driven by accountability, transparency, and progress that can be seen. Scotland can harness its strengths - its people, institutions, natural environment, and global reputation - to create and deliver an economy that is innovative, inclusive, and sustainable. This will require Scottish Government to work with industry to drive economic prosperity³⁵ by setting clear long-term targets and benchmarks, resourcing regulators to balance environmental protection with growth, and fostering collaborative structures (e.g. joint evidence programmes³⁶) to co-develop policies and innovative solutions.

Call to action

Commit to a whole-system reform that links inclusive economic growth and productivity in Scotland's foundational economy³⁷ with its growth sectors, and a tax system that is fit for long-term public service delivery.³⁸

This would align economic strategy, skills, planning, and public service reform to raise productivity, job quality, and resilience in the sectors that underpin everyday life, while launching an independent national inquiry into taxation and fiscal sustainability to ensure revenues are fair, adequate, and transparent. The inquiry would assess what can be achieved within devolved powers, what requires UK-level action, and how taxation can better support inclusive growth, with clear public communication on trade-offs and priorities.



- 35 RSE. (2023). *Securing the economic and environmental benefits from the transition to net zero*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/securing-the-economic-and-environmental-benefits-from-the-transition-to-net-zero/>
- 36 Scottish Government. (2025). *A Common Understanding 2025 – Working Together for the People of Scotland*. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2025/07/common-understanding-2025/documents/common-understanding-2025-working-together-people-scotland/common-understanding-2025-working-together-people-scotland/govscot%3Adocument/common-understanding-2025-working-together-people-scotland.pdf>
- 37 Foundational economy refers to the essential goods and services (e.g. housing, healthcare, food and utilities) that are necessary for everyday life and contribute to our wellbeing.
- 38 See appendix for detailed policy options.



Health and social care

From an ageing population and workforce shortages, to widening inequalities and chronic underinvestment in prevention, Scotland's health³⁹ and social care system is under sustained pressure⁴⁰ on multiple fronts. Life expectancy has been decreasing across the country, but especially in Scotland's most deprived communities (de Haro Moro et al., 2025).

At its core, this is not simply a crisis of capacity; it is a crisis of trust, participation, and direction. The debate must move beyond how much we spend to how we govern and deliver health and care differently. Scotland must recognise health as a social justice issue, shaped by where people live, the work they do, their access to services, and the environments that sustain them.⁴¹

Evidence from the RSE⁴² and recent academic research (Barányi et al., 2020) underscores that the socio-economic and physical environment, including income, education, housing, transport, and air quality, directly determine health outcomes and inequalities.⁴³

The four approaches to doing policy differently are applied below, addressing health as a social justice issue. Each is presented alongside evidence highlighting the health-related challenges it seeks to address.

Paternalism to partnership

Research shows that decision-making in health and social care can be lacking in transparency and inclusivity (Cherrie et al., 2021; Walsh, Wyper, and McCartney, 2022). People often feel that health and care systems are done to them, not with them. Decision-making is remote and governed by technical experts, and local voices are underused. When health systems⁴⁴ engage communities, particularly rural and island populations, outcomes improve as evidenced by World Health Organisation (2021)⁴⁵ guidelines on rural health workforce where locally driven innovation contributed to recruitment, retention, and equity. This includes recognising the role of nature-based and community-led approaches (e.g. green prescribing) in improving mental and physical health, reducing pressure on clinical services, and supporting wider environmental priorities.



39 BMA. (2025). *NHS under pressure - Scotland*. <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/nhs-under-pressure-scotland>

40 COSLA. (2026). *COSLA calls for urgent national action to address Scotland's crisis in social care*. <https://www.cosla.gov.uk/news/2025/october/scotlands-crisis-in-social-care>

41 NHS Health Scotland. (2016). *Power – a health and social justice issue*. <https://elevatorni.org/app/uploads/2019/04/Power-a-health-and-social-justice-issue-NHS-Scotland.pdf>

42 RSE. (2022). *Inquiry on health inequalities*. AP22-08. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/inquiry-on-health-inequalities/>

43 CRESH. (2025). *Recession, austerity and health*. <https://cresh.org.uk/>

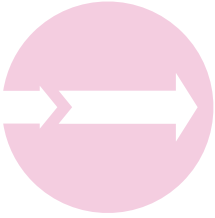
44 RSE. (2023). *Healthcare in Scotland's remote and rural areas*. AP23-6. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/healthcare-in-scotlands-remoteand-rural-areas/>

45 WHO. (2021). *WHO guideline on health workforce development, attraction, recruitment and retention in rural and remote areas*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240024229>



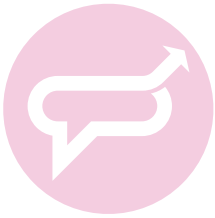
Surviving to thriving

Poverty, insecure housing, and poor environments trap people in ill-health, limiting their capacity to participate in society and democracy. Research by Cherrie et al. (2021), as part of the Recession, Austerity and Health project, shows that welfare cuts and unemployment after the Great Recession were associated with increased antidepressant use, especially in regions with weak labour markets. Health inequalities widened when economic resilience was low – a clear example of how economic and welfare policy decisions drive health injustice. Currently, Scotland is witnessing worsening mortality rates and increasing health injustices, especially amongst deprived populations (de Haro Moro et al., 2025). Therefore, it is important to consider that economic decline and related austerity measures have health impacts, which may lead to increasing health care needs and costs.



Short-term to long-term

Short political cycles discourage investment in prevention, workforce planning, and integrated service models. The RSE has previously stressed the need for long-term, cross-sectoral collaboration, especially to address workforce shortages in health and social care in rural and remote communities.⁴⁶ Furthermore, care is a gendered role in Scottish society⁴⁷ where women are far more likely to take on childcare responsibilities and unpaid care work.⁴⁸ This leads to financial instability and poor mental health outcomes, costing the economy. This is a moral responsibility for the government to tackle – as women form half the population. A long-term outlook on health and social care, along with deciding how Scotland pays for it, is necessary to ensure Scotland invests in the social and economic wellbeing of society.



Rhetoric to delivery

Scotland has strong health policy ambitions but limited delivery capacity and accountability. The RSE's 2022 response to a Scottish Parliament's inquiry warned that health inequalities are derived from sectors outside the health and social care remit and so cannot be tackled by the health sector alone.⁴⁹ Housing, education, environment, and economic strategy must all align behind shared goals for wellbeing and inclusion. Delivering on health priorities requires collaboration across sectors, and collaboration with local communities, so that families and individuals can access medical as well as non-medical support through social practitioners.

Health is inseparable from a thriving economy and social justice. A society cannot be cohesive if health outcomes remain unequal, or if policy treats wellbeing as secondary to growth. The next Scottish Government must not approach health as a siloed service, but, along with education and skills, as the foundation of an inclusive economy, democratic participation, productivity, and trust. Investing in prevention and understanding the total cost of health care (e.g. comparing early detection and regular checks with the costs of treating disease at advanced stages) are essential to design policies that are both economically sustainable and socially just. Doing health promotion differently – through education, partnership, prevention, long-term vision, and delivery that matches rhetoric – is not only good policy. It is the path to a fairer, healthier, and more united Scotland.



HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Call to action

Commit to a whole-system shift towards preventative public health, placing mental health, wellbeing, and health equity at the centre of government decision-making, and invest in the local delivery capacity needed to make it real.⁵⁰

This requires embedding health and wellbeing outcomes across all policy areas, aligning capital and revenue funding through place-based planning, and equipping local systems (e.g. Integration Joint Boards, councils, and third-sector partners) with the data, leadership, and implementation capability to deliver trusted, community-based prevention at scale. Success should be measured transparently through outcomes co-defined with communities, with explicit choices and trade-offs made between prevention and acute provision.

46 RSE. (2023). Healthcare in Scotland's remote and rural areas. AP23-6. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/healthcare-in-scotlands-remoteand-rural-areas/>

47 Smith, C., & Hawkey, D. (2024). *Child Maintenance and its impact on child poverty and financial security for single parent families*. https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/OPFS_Child_Maintenance_Report_1.pdf

48 IPPR Scotland. (2025). *Women in Scotland: the gendered impact of care on financial stability and well-being*. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/women-in-scotland-the-gendered-impact-of-care-on-financial-stability-and-well-being>

49 RSE. (2022). Inquiry on health inequalities. AP22-08. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/inquiry-on-health-inequalities/>

50 See appendix for more detailed policy options.



Immigration and asylum

Migration is crucial to Scotland's future. It underpins our economic success, cultural vibrancy, and long-term population sustainability. While immigration and asylum policy are reserved matters, the demographic pressures facing Scotland mean that the Scottish Government and Parliament must consider how to support population and workforce growth within their existing powers, and work constructively with the UK Government to ensure Scotland's needs are recognised.

The next Scottish election will be the most contested and polarised in recent history. Changing perceptions of immigration have both caused and entrenched this division. The debate needs to move beyond arguments about borders and hostile environment policies⁵¹ that perpetuate structural inequalities and hinder social cohesion to the real question: how do we help people settle, contribute, and feel that they belong in Scotland?

Research shows that Scotland's attitudes to immigration are more positive than those in other parts of the UK, but also more fragile than assumed. Research by Migration Policy Scotland,⁵² demonstrates that, while a majority of Scots recognise the economic and cultural value of migration, this support can quickly deteriorate when debates become politicised or framed around threat. These are the result of what research project BRIDGES describes as "migration narratives", or the stories told in media and political debate by politicians and policymakers about immigration, especially when stories aimed at fearmongering dominate news-media.⁵³ Further, increasing levels of disinformation and hostile debate are influencing perceptions of immigration and entrenching division.

The RSE submission to the Migration Advisory Committee emphasised that Scotland relies significantly on inward migration to fill labour shortages in health and care, science, technology, and mathematics (STEM) sectors, hospitality, construction, and the green economy. These shortages are acute, structural, and projected to widen without targeted and sustained inward migration combined with better integration.⁵⁴

Scotland hosts a very small portion of the world's asylum population (~0.026% of the world's refugees according to the Scottish Refugee Council)⁵⁵ and the UK houses significantly fewer asylum seekers in relation to population size compared to neighbouring European countries. The UK (including Scotland) is bound by international obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention⁵⁶ and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).⁵⁷ The RSE's advice paper on UK asylum system reform strongly criticised proposals that would discriminate based on an asylum seeker's method of arrival, calling such proposals incompatible with treaty obligations.⁵⁸

Policy and discourse in Scotland must ensure that action is evidence-led and that immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are humanised rather than villainised. By doing so, we ensure that all communities prosper and can fully participate socially and economically in Scotland's future. This would strengthen economic prosperity, protect human dignity, and build social cohesion.

51 JCWI. (n.d.). *The Hostile environment explained*. <https://jcw.org.uk/reportsbriefings/the-hostile-environment-explained/>

52 Smellie, S. (2024). *Attitudes and narratives on immigration: is Scotland really different?* <https://rse.org.uk/resource/attitudes-and-narratives-on-immigration-is-scotland-really-different/>

53 BRIDGES. (2024). *Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives*. <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/>

54 RSE. (2019). *Response to Shortage Occupation List*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/response-to-shortage-occupation-list/>

55 Scottish Refugee Council. (n.d.). *About*. <https://scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/about/press-office/>

56 UNHCR. (1951). *The Refugee Convention, 1951*. <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/4ca34be29.pdf>

57 ECHR. (1950). *European Convention on Human Rights*. https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

58 RSE (2021). *UK asylum system proposed reforms*. AP21-04. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/uk-asylum-system-proposed-reforms/>



Paternalism to partnership

Public debate on immigration and asylum often relies on provocative narratives rather than factual evidence, with discourse frequently conflating different types of migrants (i.e. people fleeing persecution (refugees), people claiming asylum (asylum seekers), migrants who come to the UK on work or study visas, and irregular migrants). Irregular migrants are individuals who cross international borders without official permission from the authorities, often driven by poverty, conflict, or natural disasters.⁵⁹ The term “irregular” refers to a lack of legal status rather than criminality. In Scotland, as elsewhere, these narratives are increasingly shaped and distorted by social media algorithms, AI-generated content, and a wider post-truth political environment. In this context, simply presenting facts is unlikely to be sufficient; policymakers must also understand how misinformation spreads and how public understanding is formed. In Scotland, around 5,500 people are currently seeking asylum, which is roughly ~0.1 % of Scotland’s population of about 5.5 million and a very small share of total migration flows. At the UK level, there were around 956,000 non-visit visas issued in 2024 (for work, study and other lawful reasons), making up the vast majority of long-term migration, whereas safe and legal humanitarian routes accounted for about 70,000 people (~0.1 % of the UK population). Detected irregular arrivals numbered ~44,000 (~0.07 % of the UK population),⁶⁰ meaning irregular migration is the smallest share of recorded migration.

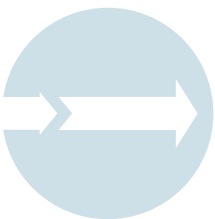
Even though people seeking asylum and those arriving irregularly each constitute a very small proportion of the population and overall migration flows, public discourse often assumes irregular migration is the dominant form. This fuels fear-based rhetoric, increases xenophobia, and encourages reactive or punitive policy responses such as isolated hotel accommodation and delayed access to work or services. Even if the numbers were higher, providing asylum to those in need should also not be considered a problem. Misconceptions also weaken social cohesion, as communities then perceive asylum seekers as a problem rather than contributors. Thus, we need cross-sectoral working between government, community, and the third sector for knowledge diffusion and to combat mis/disinformation.



Surviving to thriving

Integration of migrants depends on stable housing, language access, work, healthy food, and social inclusion. Evidence from Refugee Action⁶¹ and Scottish Refugee Council⁶² shows that hotel accommodation often leads to isolation and poor living conditions. Given the high use of hotel accommodation in Scotland,⁶³ there is a clear need for better oversight, community-based dispersal, and local support.

Migrants’ ability to contribute also depends on the recognition of overseas qualifications, access to professional registration, and English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) pathways. Integration is shaped by the systems people rely on daily (e.g. housing, welfare, education, and local government). By extension, any policies aimed at integration must thread across these sectors. A cross-governmental approach to policy and delivery is required.



Short-term to long-term

Without inward migration and asylum intake, the working-age population will decline, placing pressure on economic growth, tax revenue, and public services. However, migration and asylum policy continues to be defined by short-term political cycles.

RSE analysis stresses that sustainable policy must be long-term and cross-sectoral, combining labour market planning, housing, education, health, and spatial strategy, and including both migrants and asylum seekers.⁶⁴

Research on the challenges of decentralising immigration highlights that effective policy requires long-term planning rather than reactive changes to rules, thresholds, or pathways.⁶⁵ This includes planning for asylum accommodation, integration, and community support, alongside labour migration.

59 The Migration Observatory. (2025). *Unauthorised migration in the UK*. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/unauthorised-migration-in-the-uk/>

60 Scottish Government. (2024). *Community Learning and Development (CLD) – Statistics Brief*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-learning-development-cld-statistics-brief/pages/8/>

61 Refugee Action. (2023). *Hostile Accommodation – How the asylum housing system is cruel by design*. <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Hostile-Accommodation-Refugee-Action-report.pdf>

62 Scottish Refugee Council. (2023). *Community Concern at Hotel Accommodation*. <https://scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/community-concern-at-hotel-accommodation/>

63 Scottish Government. (2025). *Asylum seeker hotel accommodation in Scotland: FOI release*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202500476595/>

64 RSE (2021). *UK asylum system proposed reforms*. AP21-04. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/uk-asylum-system-proposed-reforms/>

65 Pardos-Prado, S. (2023). *The challenges of decentralising immigration policy*. <https://rse.org.uk/resource/the-challenges-of-decentralising-immigration-policy/>



Rhetoric to delivery

While immigration powers remain largely reserved, the Scottish Government controls crucial levers that shape migrants' and asylum seekers' daily lives: education, skills, housing, health, and local integration. Scottish Government should work with UK Government to ensure that UK Government policy reflects the Scottish context in terms of its economy and workforce requirements.⁶⁶ For example, salary thresholds for migrant workers and qualification and skills recognition could be made more flexible as many Scottish vacancies (particularly in care, hospitality, and rural sectors) sit below the high UK-wide thresholds.⁶⁷

In its written evidence to the UK Parliament, the RSE also stressed that Scotland's and the UK's science and innovation base depends on attracting internationally mobile researchers and specialists, making a proportionate, evidence-based immigration system essential.⁶⁸ Likewise, an advice paper on health inequalities⁶⁹ highlights that no single sector can address structural disadvantage alone, and this applies equally to migration, integration, and asylum.



IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

Call to action

Establish a coordinated, cross-government migration and integration framework grounded in transparent data, clear public communication, and place-based labour-market planning.

This would involve systematically mapping workforce needs across regions, aligning migration and asylum policy with housing, skills, and local economic development, and publishing clear, independently audited data on migration flows, integration outcomes, and local impacts. A national public information programme should accompany this approach to tackle misinformation, improve public understanding of how the system works, and support evidence-based, humane political, and public discourse.



⁶⁶ Pardos-Prado (2023)

⁶⁷ RSE. (2019). Response to shortage occupation list. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/response-to-shortage-occupation-list/>

⁶⁸ RSE. (2018). *Written evidence on an immigration system that works for science and innovation (IWS0032)*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/91332/html/>

⁶⁹ RSE. (2022). Inquiry on health inequalities. AP22-08. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/inquiry-on-health-inequalities/>



Housing

Everyone needs a secure, warm, and healthy home, but Scotland's housing challenges cannot be understood, or solved, through a social policy lens alone. While over 30,000 households are currently assessed as homeless or at risk of homelessness, this is a symptom of deeper, long-standing failures in Scotland's housing system and its integration with economic policymaking.⁷⁰ As the David Hume Institute has argued, homelessness is always a housing problem – but housing itself is also an economic, labour-market, and infrastructure issue.⁷¹

The Scottish Government declared a national housing emergency in May 2024, but the origins of this crisis can be traced back decades. Years of underinvestment in affordable housing, ineffective regulations, and siloed policymaking has driven these problems to the brink. Although recent increases in public investment are welcome, current funding trajectories remain insufficient to meet projected housing need over the next decade, meaning that improved governance and delivery models are essential if limited resources are to achieve system-wide impact. In addition, many of our homes in cities, towns, and rural Scotland are not environmentally sustainable, energy efficient, or ready to meet the impacts of climate change, compounding the effects of poverty. Success in housing policy will largely be determined by three measurements:

- 1) Improving the current stock of housing
- 2) Increasing new housing stock to meet demand
- 3) Making housing affordable

If Scotland is not successful, not only will it drive further increases in fuel poverty, health inequalities, and homelessness, but it will also impact economic growth.⁷² Housing policy provides a particularly powerful example of how rejecting the status quo and embracing a new form of politics could rapidly make a real difference to people's lives.

Paternalism to partnership

Recent housing reforms and legislation have not engaged with housing associations (particularly community-based housing associations), which are instrumental in tackling poverty. If housing policy is to shift towards partnership, we need to afford community groups more space to exercise their autonomy and implement solutions tailored to the local context. Further, there are numerous partnership changes required, including the establishment of Regional Economic Partnerships,⁷³ restoring strategic capacity at a regional level and enabling local governments to exercise greater authority over housing system governance.



⁷⁰ MacLennan and Fleming (2025). David Hume Institute. (2025). Prosperity Begins at Home: Disruptions to Improve Scotland's Housing System. <https://davidhumeinstitute.org/past/2025/10/3/research-launch-prosperity-begins-at-home>

⁷¹ MacLennan and Fleming (2025).

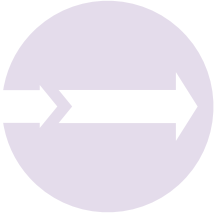
⁷² Barclay, T. (2025). Scotland's fuel poverty crisis demands action, not just targets. *TFN*, 30 September 2025. <https://tfn.scot/opinion/scotlands-fuel-poverty-crisis-demands-action-not-just-targets>

⁷³ MacLennan and Fleming (2025). David Hume Institute, Prosperity begins at home.



Surviving to thriving

There is a lack of understanding in Scotland of how the housing system at large actually functions – it is not a single, functional market but a complex, interacting system of land, finance, planning, construction and policy that is currently struggling to align.⁷⁴ Current approaches often focus on isolated aspects, such as social housing or private development, without considering the broader ecosystem that underpins housing delivery and affordability. Building homes is interconnected with planning and land use policy, regulatory frameworks, market dynamics, infrastructure and public services in local areas. Low real income growth and constrained household purchasing power mean that market-led delivery alone is unlikely to operate at the scale or pace required, even where planning processes function effectively.



Short-term to long-term

Housing is central to Scotland's prosperity, impacting workforce, health, and climate and environmental sustainability goals.⁷⁵ This requires investment in high quality, energy-efficient homes that support wellbeing rather than just meeting minimum standards. Until now, governments have tried to resolve issues predominantly through regulation or additional funding, neither of which has provided lasting solutions. Future public investment should be explicitly linked to enhanced performance standards and more efficient design and delivery approaches, ensuring that homes built today are future-proofed and do not require costly retrofit by the 2035–2040 period. This approach would align capital spend with long-term value, emissions reductions, affordability objectives, and make more productive use of construction workforce.



Rhetoric to delivery

Scotland's housing crisis requires bold, system-wide reforms. Ambitious housing targets have, to date, lacked credible delivery mechanisms. The RSE supports recommendations from Prosper⁷⁶ for a national oversight function to monitor progress and pursue planning and regulatory reform to unblock stalled developments and encourage investments where developments will contribute positively to Scotland's economy, environment, and communities. The RSE also supports treating housing as core national infrastructure,⁷⁷ as the David Hume Institute has proposed, with stronger national oversight alongside devolved, regionally tailored strategies. This includes local and regional audits of housing supply chains and delivery capacity, working with regional economic partnerships to align housing investment with economic, environmental, and social outcomes. With bold reforms and genuine partnership, housing can shift from being a source of vulnerability to a foundation for national prosperity. Planning reform should be understood as a tool for coordination and risk-reduction across the housing system, rather than as a primary constraint on supply in isolation from finance, labour, infrastructure, and institutional capacity.

Call to action

Establish a cross-party agreement on housing to provide long-term certainty for supply, affordability, and decarbonisation.⁷⁸

Guarantee multi-year funding for affordable housing and large-scale retrofit programmes, enable diverse delivery models (public, private, third-sector, and community-led) to accelerate construction and reduce reliance on a small number of developers, and scale tailored rural housing solutions and mixed-tenure developments. Embed tenants and communities in decision-making to ensure delivery meets local needs.

⁷⁴ Macfarlane, L. (2017). The housing land market in Scotland: A discussion paper. https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5de1a716b632b_Land-Lines-Discussion-Paper-Housing-Land-Market-Dec-2017.pdf

⁷⁵ MacLennan and Fleming (2025). David Hume Institute, Prosperity begins at home.

⁷⁶ Prosper. (2025). *Housing shortage threatens Scotland's growth ambitions*. <https://prosper.scot/housing-supply/>

⁷⁷ RSE. (2022). *Response to the Scottish Government consultation on the draft Fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4)*. AP22-05. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/fourth-national-planning-framework-npf4/>

⁷⁸ See appendix for detailed policy options.





Education and skills

Fostering the capabilities of its people is key to a nation's success, from the strength of its economy to the health and wellbeing of its population, and its resilience in the face of adversity. Scotland is no different: the skills and knowledge of its people are inextricably linked to its overall prosperity. The education and skills system is a continuum, stretching from the early years to lifelong learning. It supports initial learning, reskilling, and upskilling at all life stages. Learning occurs in nurseries, schools, colleges, universities, training, workplaces, and in many other domains. Changes introduced to one aspect of this learning system can have profound and sometimes unintended impacts on other parts of the system. While this systems view is essential, it must also be future-focused, with education and skills policy explicitly aligned to the achievement of Scotland's long-term national objectives.

However, a major finding of the RSE's recent analysis of the education policy landscape was a persistent lack of coherence between national priority-setting and the education and skills policies intended to deliver them.⁷⁹ Too often, skills and education are treated as a parallel or downstream consideration rather than as integral to policy design, limiting the effectiveness of delivery across sectors.

Paternalism to partnership

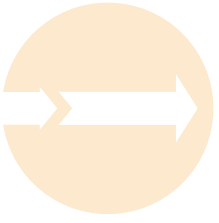
A shift towards partnership requires a move away from top-down reform to collaborative governance that involves learners, educators, employers, and communities as equal partners rather than just passive recipients of policy. This includes direct communication between employers and educators to align skills provision with economic needs while championing individual aspirations beyond "job readiness", enabling people to develop, reskill and upskill for future economic, societal, environmental, and personal goals.

Surviving to thriving

Education should promote human dignity, wellbeing, adaptability, and, indeed, flourishing. As technology and climate imperatives reshape work, learners need continuous opportunities for reskilling and upskilling throughout life, as well as increasing environmental literacy within our education system. This includes modular learning, micro-credentials, and flexible access to higher education and training. Understanding emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), will be a core capability for learners, educators, employers, and policymakers alike.⁸⁰ This includes developing data literacy, ethical reasoning, and sector-specific judgement so that AI augments, rather than replaces, human expertise, creativity, and professional responsibility across sectors. However, there is a distinct lack of coherence between the envisaged outcomes for Scottish education and skills and other policy areas. For example, the drive to net-zero is heavily based on securing the necessary workforce in key sectors, yet Scotland routinely falls short of recruitment targets, with shortages compounding over time as decarbonisation efforts intensify.

79 RSE. (2025). *Gaps, overlaps and challenges: assessing the alignment of Scotland's education reform agenda with national priorities*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/gaps-overlaps-and-challenges-education-reform-report/>

80 OECD. (2021). *AI and the Future of Skills, Volume 1: Capabilities and Assessments*. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/ai-and-the-future-of-skills-volume-1_5ee71f34-en.html



Short-term to long-term

Scotland needs to develop an overarching strategy for education and skills to 2050, aligned with economic, social, and environmental goals.⁸¹ Future proofing education and skills will require a clear, shared-purpose system that is accessible to all, values diverse forms of learning, and is supported by families and communities. A future system must be flexible, offering lifelong learning pathways that are adaptable, technologically enabled, mutually respected across education and the economy, and lead to a wide range of meaningful post-school destinations.

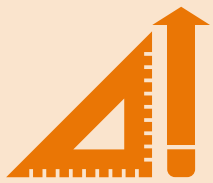


Rhetoric to delivery

To achieve this shift, we need to agree on a purpose for Scottish education and how its effectiveness should be measured in practice, to support today's challenges and prepare for future changes, to see education and skills development as a lifelong opportunity. Until we can view the education and skills system through a holistic lens and place value on all pathways, learners will continue to be channelled in certain directions, driven by the metrics heralded each year – the number of Highers achieved and the percentage of school leavers entering university, with little mention of other qualifications and awards gained by learners across many settings throughout the year.

Education and skills policy must be viewed not in isolation, but as a fundamental component of a thriving nation. It is important that Scottish Government demonstrates leadership by championing a culture of lifelong learning that values all educational pathways and destinations, removing barriers for individuals and employers, prioritising meaningful competencies, and embracing technology to enhance equitable learning opportunities.

It is essential that the nation's entire policy agenda is underpinned by an education and skills system that aligns with these objectives from both a social, economic and environmental perspective. This alignment must be evidenced not only in policy narratives, but also in the respective actions taken to deliver them.



EDUCATION
AND SKILLS

Call to action

Develop and implement a long-term, coherent national strategy for education and skills that aligns with Scotland's economic, social, and environmental priorities.⁸²

This should include new approaches to skills planning across early years, schools, tertiary education, and in-work upskilling. It will design and deliver a modern curriculum that is fit for purpose and meets individual aspirations and societal goals, which will embed values, lived experience, and professional inputs to ensure the system equips learners with the capabilities needed to thrive in a changing economy.

⁸¹ RSE. (2024). *Education and skills 2050: Future proofing Scotland*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/education-and-skills-2050-future-proofing-scotland/>

⁸² See appendix for detailed policy options.



Environment

Our climate is changing, and biodiversity is in decline. Scotland has acknowledged the nature and climate emergencies; however, whether these crises are being tackled collectively, urgently, and at a sufficient scale is debatable. The twin nature and climate crises require bold, practical action that secures a healthy environment for both people and nature. This means making sure people have the right to live in a clean and sustainable environment and navigating a fair economic transition to net-zero. It also requires reforming how we deliver on our (commendable) environmental commitments. We need to move from rhetoric to results and bolster the mandates and powers of environmental agencies to ensure real progress for people, nature, and the climate. This also requires effective communication with the people of Scotland – keeping the climate and nature emergencies visible in public discourse, ensuring citizens understand both the risks and the solutions, and empowering communities to participate in shaping and supporting the transition.



Paternalism to partnership

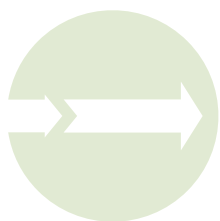
Environmental policy has often relied on top-down, compliance-driven approaches, where targets, restrictions, and interventions are designed centrally and delivered to communities. While well-intentioned, this paternalistic model can overlook local knowledge, weaken trust, and fail to build the long-term stewardship needed for climate and nature recovery.

What is needed instead is a shift to partnership, where communities, land managers, local organisations, and government all contribute to the decision-making process to arrive at workable, fair, and effective environmental solutions.



Surviving to thriving

Policies focused on immediate risks – such as emergency responses to flooding or biodiversity loss – do not address the root causes of environmental degradation and climate change. What is needed are long-term, integrated frameworks that anticipate future challenges and embed sustainability into economic and social systems. This includes nature-based solutions, circular economy principles, and climate adaptation strategies.



Short-term to long-term

There is arguably no policy issue more important than addressing the twin crises. Aside from the catastrophic impact on the lived environment – such as depletion of natural resources, frequent and intense drought, and extreme weather events – failure to tackle these threats will heighten health and social inequalities and push millions of people into extreme poverty.⁸³ Given this interconnectedness, halting and reversing environmental degradation will have substantial and meaningful benefits across the whole of society. This provides a strong case for increased and sustained investment in mitigating climate change and halting biodiversity loss.



Rhetoric to delivery

Scotland urgently needs a whole-system approach to environmental policy and biodiversity, one that integrates the restoration and protection of land, freshwater, and marine ecosystems; removes harmful financial subsidies for extractive processes; and accelerates investment in nature-friendly solutions. These policies need to be explicitly linked to economic and other policies to ensure that industrial growth is not driven at the cost of environmental outcomes. Current delivery structures are falling short, and we need to strengthen existing institutions and embed accountability across the system.

Scotland's nature and climate emergencies require a shift from aspiration to actual delivery. Restoring ecosystems, driving a just transition to net zero, and strengthening environmental governance will require shared responsibility across government, communities, business and industry. By combining long-term targets with practical action, transparent accountability, and meaningful public participation, Scotland can move from dealing with decline to regenerating the natural systems that sustain people, places, and the economy.

Call to action

Create a cross-party charter committing all parties to long-term action on statutory biodiversity and climate targets, halting biodiversity decline by 2030 and restoring nature by 2045, and align public and private investment with public good.⁸⁴

The charter would embed climate and biodiversity commitments across transport, housing, health, and economic policy; redirect funding from already-profitable industries with contested environmental benefits toward native woodland restoration, regenerative farming, and ecosystem-level interventions; and require transparent monitoring, governance, and enforcement to deliver measurable ecological and social outcomes.



ENVIRONMENT

Conclusion

The evidence set out across this paper points to a persistent and systemic implementation gap in Scotland's approach to policymaking. Across the economy, health and social care, immigration and asylum, housing, and the environment; reform, ambitious strategies and legislative commitments have not translated into outcomes at the pace or scale required. Independent assessments, including repeated findings by Audit Scotland⁸⁵ and parliamentary committees, consistently highlight weaknesses in delivery planning, unclear accountability, limited capacity, and insufficient evaluation. Despite this, policy responses frequently focus on revising strategies or setting new targets, rather than addressing the structural and cultural barriers to implementation. The result is a cycle in which commitments are renewed, but outcomes remain unchanged.

This gap cannot be explained by a lack of evidence or policy ambition. Scotland benefits from a strong analytical base, extensive consultation, and a stated commitment to evidence-based decision-making. Since May 2021, Scottish Government has published approximately 300 consultations for public input on policies. However, the evidence also shows that political and institutional incentives are misaligned with effective delivery.⁸⁶ In practice, politicians are rarely required to make explicit choices between competing objectives, to sequence priorities over time, or to confront the trade-offs inherent in constrained fiscal and workforce environments. In the absence of robust challenges – within government, across Parliament, and through external scrutiny – political complacency and risk aversion can be reinforced. Multiple priorities are pursued simultaneously, often without sufficient clarity on resourcing or feasibility, diluting impact and obscuring responsibility when delivery falls short.

Effective implementation depends on governance systems that are designed for delivery, not just policy formation. Evidence from public sector performance reviews⁸⁷ consistently demonstrates that outcomes improve where there is clear ownership, stable funding, programme management capability, and measurable objectives. However, responsibilities are often dispersed across central government, agencies, and local authorities without corresponding alignment of budgets, ownership, or accountability. Civil servants and delivery partners frequently operate within short-term funding cycles and shifting policy signals, while parliamentary scrutiny is constrained by limited analytical capacity relative to the scale and complexity of legislation. As a result, rhetoric around wellbeing, participation, or inclusive growth is not consistently matched by robust delivery plans, performance metrics, or systematic evaluation; nor is it recognised as being interdependent on other policy areas.

This paper therefore advances a clear, evidence-based proposition: policymaking in Scotland must shift towards a delivery-led focus to policymaking grounded in realism about constraints and explicit about prioritisation. Every policy commitment should be accompanied by named leadership, defined budgets, clear delivery milestones, robust evaluation frameworks, and details on how it fits in the larger policy agenda. The fragmented nature of our policy landscape leads to a “do everything” mentality as opposed to a “do a few things very well” mentality. Implementation should be decentralised where appropriate, aligning governance with regional economic and social geographies. Accountability must be strengthened through independent scrutiny, transparent reporting of progress, and clarity on the allocation of responsibility and resources. Crucially, sustained investment is required in programme management, evaluation, and scrutiny capacity across the civil service, the Scottish Parliament, local government, and delivery bodies.

The evidence points to a political as well as a technical challenge. Persistent implementation failure undermines public trust and weakens democratic legitimacy, particularly among those communities most affected by policy shortfalls. Scotland now faces a choice between a politics of broad aspiration and limited accountability, and a politics grounded in empathy, evidence, and delivery. The latter demands more than consensus-building rhetoric: it requires political leaders and institutions to make difficult choices, to explain trade-offs honestly, and to sustain focus on outcomes rather than announcements. This paper brings together evidence of what effective policy can look like in practice. The challenge now is cultural as much as structural – to move away from polarisation and disagreement, and towards a politics that takes lived experience seriously, values evidence over misleading narratives, and is judged by whether it delivers meaningful change.

85 Audit Scotland. (n.d.) *Publications*. <https://audit.scot/publications/search>

86 Gallagher, J. (2025). *Fixing Broken Government*. <https://ourscottishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Fixing-Broken-Government-1.pdf>

87 Scottish Government. (2025). *The Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2025*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-security-assessment-on-global-biodiversity-loss-ecosystem-collapse-and-national-security>

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Appendix - policy options

The economy

Inclusive economic growth

- ▶ Refresh the National Strategy for Economic Transformation⁸⁸ to focus on:
 - > High-growth sectors (advanced manufacturing, clean energy industries, creative industries, defence, digital and technologies, financial services, life sciences, and professional and business services).
 - > Supporting innovative Scottish businesses (Innovation-Driven Enterprises) to grow, scale internationally, and build strong leadership.
 - > Strengthening management capabilities and cultivating a global business perspective to enhance competitiveness and retention of Scottish enterprises, not just high-tech and unicorn.
- ▶ Establish a Strategic Economic Opportunities Taskforce to:
 - > Align industrial, skills, and infrastructure strategies for priority sectors, including identifying measures to develop serious management experience and skills.
 - > Help Scotland to lead and learn globally, not just compete locally.
 - > Build flexibility and adaptive capacity into economic governance, allowing people and industries to respond to rapid change and take advantage of emerging opportunities.
 - > Encourage more people to start businesses – an “enterprise demand-pull” on Scotland’s academic and science research institutes is required. This would involve a shift in our collective entrepreneurial mindset to encourage entrepreneurs to focus on identifying what market opportunities for inward investment currently exist. This interlinks with a need for clarity around what the key, emergent market demands within Scotland’s enterprise ecosystem are before entrepreneurs turn to universities/ academic institutions for scale up support.
- ▶ Adopt a place-responsive economic approach.⁸⁹
 - > Empower decision-making at regional and local levels.
 - > Improve coordination among regional bodies.
 - > Develop spatial policies that reflect the distinct strengths and needs of Scotland’s diverse places⁹⁰
 - > Support regional growth hubs, especially in rural/post-industrial areas, via Community Wealth Building⁹¹ approaches.
- ▶ Drive Scotland’s transition to a circular economy by integrating circular economy principles into industrial and regional economic plans and collaborating with the UK Government to remove barriers, establishing a UK-level commission (much like the Climate Change Committee)⁹² to coordinate progress across devolved administrations and ensuring lessons from previous initiatives (e.g., deposit return scheme) are applied to create high-skilled green jobs and economic advantage.
- ▶ Integrate the third sector into economic planning by embedding it in national and local strategies, expanding procurement and business support access, and promoting its role in diversifying Scotland’s economic base and strengthening community ownership.⁹³
- ▶ Break generational poverty through long-term, coordinated action. Reduce child poverty to below 10% by 2030–31 with work-focused policies, social security reform, better education and skills, and continued support such as the Scottish Child Payment. Expand access to retraining and better jobs to give families a sustainable path out of poverty, while being clear about trade-offs and fiscal pressures. Tackling it requires collaboration, cross-party agreement beyond electoral cycles, better use of data, actioning inclusive research, and local engagement rooted in lived experience.⁹⁴

88 Scottish Government. (2022). *National Strategy for Economic Transformation*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-national-strategy-economic-transformation/>

89 RSE. (2024). *Efficiency and equity: Mapping the landscape of economic wellbeing in Scotland*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/efficiency-and-equity-mapping-the-landscape-of-economic-wellbeing-in-scotland/>

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91 See an example of a project supported by the RSE focused on community wealth building here: Mazzei, M. (2023) *Community wealth building in Scotland: exploring ‘new’ ways to build an inclusive local economy*. <https://rse.org.uk/community-wealth-building-in-scotland-exploring-new-ways-to-build-an-inclusive-local-economy/>

92 Climate Change Committee. (2026). *Scotland*. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/countries/country-2-scotland/>

93 RSE. (2023). *The economic contribution of the third sector in Scotland*. <https://rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RSE-AP-The-economic-contribution-of-the-third-sector-2023.pdf>

94 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025). *Poverty in Scotland 2025*. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2025>



Productivity

- ▶ Treat planning and housing as core productivity levers by implementing fast-tracking brownfield development, reducing commuting frictions, improving access to jobs, and addressing grid capacity and connectivity challenges.
- ▶ Transform public services⁹⁵ through strategic, cross-government reform that increases engagement with public and third sectors, fosters collaborative leadership, and promotes innovation while also managing risk.
- ▶ Introduce governance and accountability models, including external scrutiny mechanisms, to reward behaviours and outcomes aligned with public service reform values (prevention, place, partnership, performance) and disseminate best practices.
- ▶ Enhance public service productivity:
 - > Implement an “Innovate to Save”⁹⁶ fund to digitise back-office processes (procurement, scheduling, grants) and reinvest savings into frontline services.
 - > Standardise data platforms across councils/NHS boards to cut integration costs and open markets for Scottish GovTech SMEs.

Innovation

- ▶ Strengthen public-private partnerships for faster innovation commercialisation, leveraging the Scottish National Investment Bank (SNIB), universities, colleges, innovation centres and enterprise hubs.
- ▶ Expand risk capital availability and investment mechanisms to support the scaling of high-potential firms and to encourage domestic ownership.

Fiscal sustainability

- ▶ Ensure long-term fiscal sustainability by deploying devolved tax powers within a coherent fiscal strategy and replacing Council Tax with a Property or Land Tax⁹⁷ to align revenue with Scotland’s public service demands and demographic pressures.⁹⁸
- ▶ Commission an independent fiscal review (via the Scottish Fiscal Commission) to assess:
 - > Public service delivery models and value for money.
 - > Local government funding and potential of devolved tax powers.
 - > Long-term intergenerational fairness in funding.
- ▶ Build cross-party consensus on evidence-led fiscal reform to secure sustainable, non-partisan public finance oversight, while actively engaging with and communicating to the public to explain trade-offs, prioritisation, and the rationale for reform.
- ▶ Address wealth inequality and demographic risk:
 - > Conduct public consultation on fair and progressive tax models.
 - > Reform intergenerational care financing and explore pension reform to support equity.
 - > Review Scotland’s wealth distribution as a basis for a progressive tax design.
- ▶ Initiate a comprehensive inquiry into taxation and fiscal sustainability. Scotland’s existing tax model, particularly the limited scope of devolved taxes (income tax, Council Tax⁹⁹/Non-Domestic Rates/Property or Land Value Tax), is insufficient to meet long-term public service demands and address inequality. This inquiry should aim to identify both short-term and long-term fiscal options, including what can be achieved within devolved powers, what requires UK-level action, and how taxation can support equitable, sustainable public services, and inclusive economic growth.

95 RSE. (2024). *Public Service Reform in Scotland: How do we turn rhetoric into reality?* <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/public-service-reform-in-scotland-how-do-we-turn-rhetoric-into-reality/>

96 Y Lab. (n.d.). *The Innovate to Save Playbook*. <https://ylab.wales/resource/the-innovate-to-save-playbook/>

97 RSE. (2023). *A fairer council tax*. AP23-07. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/a-fairer-council-tax/>

98 Scottish Fiscal Commission (2025). *Health Challenges Risk Scottish Government’s Fiscal Sustainability*. <https://fiscalcommission.scot/health-challenges-risk-scottish-governments-fiscal-sustainability/>

99 RSE. (2023). *A fairer council tax*.

Health and social care

- ▶ Adopt a wellbeing economy¹⁰⁰ approach with clear targets to measure success by health and wellbeing, not Gross Domestic Product (GDP) alone.
- ▶ Ensure fair distribution of resources, services, and opportunities by embedding health outcomes into integrated planning across housing, transport, environment, and economic policy.
- > Use shared spatial and health inequality data to target investment, co-locate housing, primary care, transport, green space, and employability support, and align capital and revenue funding across portfolios.
- > Embed health impact assessment (HIA)¹⁰¹ in all government spending decisions and ensure cross-government coordination.
- ▶ Invest in preventative public health care¹⁰² within education and skills, housing, nutrition, clean air, social prescribing, and mental health to ensure improvements in population health and reduce pressures faced by health and community services.
- ▶ Build participatory planning mechanisms into Integrated Joint Boards and regional health partnerships.¹⁰³
- ▶ Embed co-production and community engagement in all stages of policy and delivery and use citizen health assemblies and community panels¹⁰⁴ to shape service priorities (Conquer et al., 2024).
- ▶ Invest in delivery capacity within local systems, enhancing data-driven policymaking, leadership, and implementation skills to ensure effective community engagement and service delivery. Through support to local authorities and third-sector organisations closest to communities, enable them to deliver responsive, trusted, and effective community-based wellbeing initiatives such as community link worker programmes, local employability partnerships, and neighbourhood mental health hubs (Kidger et al., 2025).
- ▶ Be transparent about trade-offs (e.g. investing more in preventive, community-based support may mean less immediate funding for institutional services).
- ▶ Report annually on outcomes, co-produced with people who draw on care and support, carers and communities, to provide a transparent¹⁰⁵, accessible account of what services are achieving, where progress is being made, and where improvement is needed, ensuring diverse lived experiences shape how success is defined and understood.
- ▶ Enhance collaboration and funding between researchers, policymakers and front-line workers to tackle health inequalities to ensure policies are evidence-based and practically applicable.¹⁰⁶

100 Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland. (n.d.) *What is a wellbeing economy*. <https://www.weallscotland.org/what-is-a-wellbeing-economy>

101 Health Equity Evidence Centre. (2024). *Making Health in All Policies a reality: A call for Health Impact Assessments across government to improve health and address health inequalities*. <https://www.heec.co.uk/resource/making-health-in-all-policies-a-reality-a-call-for-health-impact-assessments-across-government-to-improve-health-and-address-health-inequalities/>

102 RCPE. (2023). *Preventative healthcare*. <https://www.rcpe.ac.uk/college/consultation-response/preventative-healthcare>

103 Health and Social Care Scotland. (2026). *About Health and Social Care Integration in Scotland*. <https://hscscotland.scot/integration/>

104 Healthcare Improvement Scotland. (2025). *Citizens' Panel*. <https://www.hisengage.scot/informing-policy/citizens-panel/>

105 Department of Health. (2010). *Transparency in outcomes: a framework for adult social care — A consultation on proposals*. http://www.cpa.org.uk/cpa_documents/Transparency%20in_Outcomes_for_adult_social_care.pdf

106 RSE and Mental Health Foundation. (2025). *Report on National Workshop into Childhood Health Inequalities 2025*. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/report-on-national-workshop-into-childhood-health-inequalities/>

Immigration

- ▶ Create cross-governmental mechanisms to ensure co-ordination of policy and delivery across all government departments. Inter-governmental mechanisms with UK Government are required to ensure that the Scottish context is factored into UK Government approaches to migration policy and delivery.
- ▶ Map labour-market needs¹⁰⁷ across sectors and regions through a co-produced process involving industry, trade unions, local authorities, and refugee organisations, ensuring that workforce planning reflects both employer demand and the skills and integration potential of migrants and people seeking asylum. This process would embed migration and asylum into spatial planning, linking housing supply, transport, skills, and local economic development, ensuring that community-based distribution of asylum seekers is part of regional planning.¹⁰⁸
- ▶ Set up a permanent independent advisory group¹⁰⁹ to monitor demographic, migration, and asylum trends, and advise parliament annually on the long-term implications for Scotland's population and labour force.
- ▶ Establish Regional Integration Hubs to coordinate support by bringing together local councils, employers, and third-sector organisations, creating joined-up pathways into housing, education, employment, and community participation.¹¹⁰ Place-based integration strategies should be developed, particularly for rural and island regions facing population decline and high dispersal rates, to ensure that local capacity, housing, and services match the needs of new arrivals¹¹¹.
- ▶ Embed specific immigration policy units across local authorities to ensure that national migration and asylum policies are consistently delivered and properly supported at the local level.
- ▶ Create specialist migration officers within local authorities who can coordinate support, manage complex cases, and act as dedicated links between local services and national policy to strengthen delivery capacity.
- ▶ Invest in core settlement support – including ESOL, employability services, free bus travel, and clear housing pathways – and provide sustained, multi-year funding to local authorities and third-sector partners to enable long-term, effective delivery.
- ▶ Improve asylum accommodation quality by giving local authorities formal oversight powers and requiring transparent, outcomes-focused performance contracts with private accommodation providers.
- ▶ Transition from hotel-based asylum accommodation to community-based accommodation with enforceable quality standards to ensure people can live in safe, stable, and dignified conditions.
- ▶ Develop and launch a national public information programme explaining migration pathways, rights, and contributions to combat mis/disinformation relating to immigrants and refugees.¹¹² This should be supported by an open data dashboard, tracking migration flows, integration outcomes, and local impacts. This should be updated quarterly and independently audited to collect evidence and evaluate integration outcomes and policies. Community Learning and Development¹¹³ can support this by facilitating accessible local learning and dialogue opportunities, helping communities understand migration pathways, rights, contributions, and countering misinformation.
- ▶ Improve data and case-tracking systems so that councils, third-sector organisations, and governments can monitor accommodation, integration progress, and service needs in real time.
- ▶ Pursue stronger accountability for those whose public platforms disseminate disinformation or dehumanising rhetoric, particularly elected representatives and officeholders. Upholding humane, evidence-led discourse should be recognised as a collective responsibility and duty of care within parliamentary and governmental processes.
- ▶ Actively challenge racism and discrimination through expanded anti-racism programmes, stronger hate-crime monitoring and reporting systems, and support for community-led engagement initiatives.
- ▶ Publish annual public reports on integration outcomes, offering transparent data on employment, housing stability, language progress, qualification recognition, and other indicators of how well the system is supporting people to settle and thrive.

107 New Scots. (n.d.). *The Strategy*. <https://newscoats.scot/the-strategy/>

108 RSE. (2021). UK asylum system proposed reforms. AP21-04. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/uk-asylum-system-proposed-reforms/>

109 Pados-Prado, S. (2023). The challenges of decentralising immigration policy. <https://rse.org.uk/resource/the-challenges-of-decentralising-immigration-policy/>

110 International Organization for Migration. (n.d.) *IOM UK Refugee and Migrant Integration Hub*. <https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/iom-uk-refugee-and-migrant-integration-hub>

111 RSE. (2023). *The cost of living: impact on rural communities in Scotland*. AP23-1. <https://rse.org.uk/programme/advice-paper/the-cost-of-living-impact-on-rural-communities-in-scotland/>

112 Gessesse, T. (2025)TFN, Strengthening community cohesion in Scotland. *TFN*, 6 October 2025. <https://tfn.scot/opinion/strengthening-community-cohesion-in-scotland>

113 Education Scotland. (2025). *National community learning and development policy*. <https://education.gov.scot/learning-in-scotland/education-sectors/community-learning-and-development-cld/about-community-learning-and-development/>



Housing

- ▶ Commission a cross-party review of the housing system to agree a long-term vision to reform housing policy that identifies key players and aligns with climate targets, demographic change, and economic resilience.¹¹⁴
- ▶ Develop a cross-departmental governmental strategy for housing to ensure it reflects wider ambitions to deliver effective public services, grow businesses, and improve connectivity across Scotland, supported by clear national and local plans and a transparent pathway for long-term standards reform. This would enable alignment of workforce and skills policy with future housing demand, combining coordinated planning across education and industry with measures to improve pay, progression, and retention in the sector. This would also give industry clear sight of future requirements, enabling it to mobilise investment, skills, and supply chains to respond to iterative improvements in energy performance standards over time.
- ▶ Embed participatory planning processes so that tenants and communities have a real voice in shaping housing developments and services, aligning policy with the principles of the Christie Commission (prevention, partnership, place, performance)¹¹⁵ and which reflect regional disparities, particularly in rural areas.
- ▶ Encourage partnerships between public, private, and third sectors to deliver housing as part of the wider social and economic infrastructure, not just as welfare measures.
- ▶ Commit to long-term funding for affordable housing supply and retrofit programs to reduce our reliance on emergency measures and regulations as primary tools.
- ▶ Expand funding and flexibility for rural housing and affordable homes, enabling local authorities and housing providers to respond to higher rural costs, infrastructure constraints, and local housing need. The acute housing challenges faced by remote areas (namely, high costs and limited choice¹¹⁶) require tailored policies to ensure equity and opportunity for all regions.
- ▶ Promote mixed and balanced tenure models¹¹⁷ across developments to ensure long-term access and affordability regardless of economic status, reduce spatial concentrations of disadvantage, and support stable, inclusive communities.
- ▶ Scale up off-site manufacturing and retrofit programs to meet net-zero targets and reduce costs. Businesses should also be incentivised to mainstream sustainable and modern construction methods.

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Education and skills

Strategy

- ▶ Develop a national long-term strategy for education and skills training that spans the entire system and aligns with national priorities using coherent and cohesive approaches to early years, the school system, tertiary education and in-work upskilling and reskilling. This would require new approaches to skills planning and better alignment with the long-term needs of the economy across current sectors, as well as the incorporation of flexible skills to capture emerging sectors. In other words: occupationally siloed approaches are no longer appropriate.
- ▶ Continuously monitor and understand the skills competency at a national, regional, and local level – by communicating and working with employers in industry, public service, the third sector, the tertiary sector, educators, and civil society – to better understand future skills requirements and align with the long-term needs of the economy.
- ▶ Develop and monitor a meaningful, transparent, and widely accepted set of system metrics, moving beyond narrow measures of employability, to capture the broader capabilities needed for individuals and society to thrive in a changing economy.

Delivery

- ▶ Empower those across the education and skills system – including schools, colleges, universities, training providers and community learning – to shape its future for the benefit of all¹¹⁸ and instil a legitimate sense of ownership over the system's direction. Doing so will secure widespread support and enthusiasm to deliver proposed changes.
- ▶ Enable effective leadership that is informed by meaningful data, and policies that are aligned across national priorities.
- ▶ Embed lived experience and professional judgement across the system, recognising that educators' insights – from classrooms, workshops, campuses and workplaces – are essential to understanding how policy will operate in practice.
- ▶ Design and implement a modern curriculum that is fit for purpose to meet both individual aspirations and deliver a just, educated society that meets its climate goals and achieves a strong economic future.
- ▶ Implement a proportionate, agile, and outcomes-based assessment and qualifications system – including the use of micro-credentials, short and modular courses, and flexible pathways that allow learners, at whatever age or stage, to dip in and out of learning as their needs change – while maintaining coherence and credibility across the system.
- ▶ Ensure equitable access to lifelong learning, particularly for older workers and those in precarious employment, to prevent skills gaps from becoming structural disadvantages.
- ▶ Promote the value of different pathways equally and move away from privileging academic routes over vocational, technical, and apprenticeship pathways.



Environment

- ▶ Establish a cross-party charter for nature restoration, committing all parties to shared long-term action on climate and biodiversity, and embedding collaboration across political cycles.
- ▶ Ensure biodiversity and climate commitments are fully integrated into transport, housing, health, and economic policy to enable delivery to continue beyond political cycles.
- ▶ Deliver on the statutory targets to halt biodiversity decline by 2030 and restore nature by 2045, underpinned by a robust, evidence-based, and transparent assessment of progress.
- ▶ Improve long-term monitoring and integrate environmental datasets to support adaptive management and track ecosystem and species recovery.
- ▶ Advance the 30x30 international commitment, safeguard, and effectively manage at least 30% of Scotland's land and sea for nature by 2030, focusing on areas of highest ecological value.
- ▶ Introduce statutory rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, compelling all public authorities to take preventative and restorative action, so that Scotland's towns, cities, and rural landscapes support human wellbeing and ecological recovery.
- ▶ Put in place measures to protect threatened and declining species and act to control the substantial, and economically costly, adverse effects of invasive non-native species.
- ▶ Develop interventions to enable ecosystem-level restoration that repairs degraded habitats, reinstates natural processes, and strengthens resilience to climate impacts.
- ▶ Implement at pace the Scottish Biodiversity Delivery Plan 2024-2030¹¹⁹ underpinned by robust programme management, defined governance structures, realistic risk assessments, and coordinated action across local, regional, and national organisations.
- ▶ Align public spending and private investment with public good. Divert funding from subsidies for already profitable industries with contested environmental and social benefits, such as commercial forestry, to native woodland restoration and regenerative farming so that public money is focused on public good.¹²⁰
- ▶ Measure conservation outcomes using, in addition to species abundance and distribution measures, system-level indicators such as ecosystem connectivity, soil health, water quality, and genetic diversity to capture the full picture of ecological health.
- ▶ Provide practical and financial support for households facing climate-related risks, ensuring communities can adapt, build resilience, and contribute to long-term ecological recovery.
- ▶ Bolster the mandate, authority, and financial capacity of agencies, such as Environmental Standards Scotland, to monitor compliance and enforce legally binding biodiversity and climate targets, ensuring that regulation shifts from advice to action.
- ▶ Create an independent, "honest broker" mechanism to coordinate responsible private investment, ensuring that projects deliver scientifically evidenced environmental improvements, public value, and community benefits.¹²¹
- ▶ Ensure that government agencies accountable for the environment work together to deliver change, rather than working in isolation, or even in opposition to each other, as sometimes occurs at present.
- ▶ Support local sustainability hubs that share best practice, coordinate place-based action, and drive progress toward defined climate and nature targets.¹²²
- ▶ Embed the knowledge and perspectives of local communities into environmental decision-making to strengthen legitimacy and effectiveness.¹²³ The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services argues that current policies and frameworks will fail to deliver on climate and biodiversity, until we do so.
- ▶ Develop an action-focused public engagement programme that explains the scale of the climate and biodiversity challenges without moralising, recognising the socioeconomic barriers individuals face in changing behaviour.

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