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17 December 2025

Dear Karen,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee on human rights in rural Scotland on Tuesday 25 November 2025. The discussion highlighted the complex, intersectional barriers to rights realisation in rural areas and underscored the importance of continued collaboration amongst all duty bearers to drive progress.

During the session, I committed to two follow-up actions. First, I agreed to raise concerns about GP practice availability with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care on behalf of Tess White MSP and her Aberdeenshire constituency. I have now done so.

Secondly, I agreed to provide further information in writing on several points, including progress on the third sector multi-year funding pilot, measures we are taking to boost rural economies, and actions to improve digital access and tackle digital poverty in rural Scotland. Below I have outlined the steps being taken by the Scottish Government and our partners in these areas.

### **Third sector multi-year funding pilot**

The Scottish Government greatly values the vital role of the third sector across Scotland and recognises the significant pressures it faces in the current financial context. We therefore acknowledge the need for support, stability, and opportunities for longer-term planning and development. To deliver this, we have launched the Fairer Funding Pilot.

The Pilot currently provides multi-year funding to 51 third sector organisations, prioritising those delivering frontline services and tackling child poverty. It consists of government grants totalling over £130 million across 2025–26 and 2026–27, supporting projects in areas including health, education, justice, poverty, and culture.

At this stage, the Fairer Funding Pilot is ongoing. We aim to utilise the knowledge and understanding of the impact on the third sector organisations involved to embed fairer,

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longer-term funding models across the third sector while also remaining mindful of the challenging financial situation and external factors, particularly annual budget processes and inflationary pressures. Such factors mean that it is not currently possible to provide multi-year funding to all third sector organisations.

## **Supporting and boosting Scotland's rural economies**

Scottish Ministers are clear that developing Scotland's rural economy is essential to sustaining vibrant communities and ensuring equal opportunities across the country. A strong rural economy supports jobs, attracts investment, and underpins vital services, helping to tackle depopulation and improve quality of life. By driving innovation and connectivity, we want to further develop our resilient rural areas that already contribute fully to Scotland's prosperity. Below I have outlined some of the actions we are taking to support this.

### *Regional Growth Deals*

The Scottish Government has committed approximately £379 million to Regional Growth Deal rural projects to accelerate inclusive economic growth. The UK Government has committed approximately £248 million, bringing the total investment in rural areas through Regional Growth Deals to approximately £627 million. This investment supports a range of projects focused on key sectors such as innovation, skills development, connectivity, housing, tourism and infrastructure improvement.

Each Growth Deal is designed and delivered by partner local authorities that know their areas best and the project mix varies depending on each area's economic needs, opportunities and circumstances. The focus of Deals for predominantly rural areas differs from those designed for large urban areas and seeks to address the particular challenges and opportunities in rural areas, such as connectivity, or skills and innovation for key rural economic sectors. Some examples of Growth Deals with a rural economy focus include the Argyll and Bute Rural Deal, the Borderlands Deal and the Islands Deal.

Full detail on the focus for each Growth Deal and on the projects and programmes being supported can be found on the individual Deal websites. These are accessible via the [Scottish Government Regional Growth Deals main page](#).

### *Regional Enterprise Agencies*

Our regional enterprise agencies work closely with partners to address key issues essential for creating equality of opportunity, including adequate housing, transport, and childcare provision. They play a critical role in strengthening rural economic development by fostering innovation, improving access to resources, and creating sustainable opportunities for businesses and communities.

For example, when designing and delivering business support products and services, they consider the barriers faced by entrepreneurs and business owners with protected characteristics and how these can be addressed. The agencies also support projects and initiatives that promote green technologies and low-carbon solutions, building community resilience. Enabling communities to better cope with the impacts of climate change can, in turn, advance equality.

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### *Regional Economic Partnerships*

Scotland's regional economies, and Regional Partnerships, are key to delivering economic growth, and we are committed to enabling effective regional decision-making. The First Minister recently announced our intention to introduce enabling legislation in the next parliament, which would allow Regional Partnerships to seek legal status and a range of powers. Officials are actively engaged with regional partners, COSLA and others on how best to design this legislative framework, and in the interim we continue to look for additional ways to work with and empower Regional Partnerships.

### *Wider actions to support rural economic development*

We recognise the range of cost-of-living pressures affecting people in rural Scotland and are taking wider actions alongside our specific regional development work. At the recent committee session, I highlighted some of these measures including:

- Our continued allocation of over £3 billion a year through the 2025–26 draft budget to tackle poverty and the cost of living.
- Investment of almost £1 billion annually to fully fund the 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, with rural costs reflected in the funding formula.
- Fuel poverty and affordable transport schemes are among the concrete steps we are taking to support households in rural areas.

These examples represent only a portion of the broader work underway to strengthen rural communities and enhance economic resilience, including enablers such as housing, transport and other infrastructure. While we have made significant investments to boost rural economic development, we recognise that more needs to be done. We will continue to work closely with local partners to invest in communities and remove barriers to progress.

### **Improving digital access for social security**

Digital access was highlighted both in the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report and by the Committee as a barrier to progress in rural Scotland. The Scottish Government fully recognises the importance of accessibility, both in person and digitally, to ensure everyone can access the services they need. Reliable digital connectivity is essential for rural communities, enabling people to access social security services alongside traditional face-to-face options.

To improve digital connectivity, we are investing over £600 million in our Reaching 100% (R100) programme, expected to connect more than 113,000 premises across Scotland. We also provide support through the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme and the award-winning Scottish 4G Infill programme, which is delivering future-proofed mobile infrastructure to 55 rural and island "notspots."

At our session on 25 November, the Committee requested further detail on specific actions to improve digital access to social security. Social Security Scotland is not digital by design, but digital when appropriate, so ensuring equal care for those who prefer non-digital routes is essential. Below I have listed some examples of how the Scottish Government is improving digital access for social security:

- People can apply for all devolved benefits online, and Scotland was the first in the UK to offer online applications for disability benefits.

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- Social Security Scotland is introducing email and text updates, replacing some letters - aligning with client's preferences.
- People can contact Social Security Scotland through its webchat service and can securely upload evidence for applications through the online portal.

Scottish Ministers have a statutory duty to promote benefit take-up and are taking a range of actions to support access both online and in-person. I have listed some of our digital actions above, so below outlines some additional ways we are improving access:

- Our Benefit Take-Up Strategy sets out how we tackle barriers to take-up, using our devolved powers to ensure those who are eligible get the payments they're entitled to.
- We fund an independent advocacy service to support disabled people applying for Social Security Scotland benefits. Since its launch in January 2022, this service has supported over 13,000 people across more than 15,000 cases.
- Social Security Scotland's Local Delivery Service offers clients face-to-face support from trained advisors who can support clients accessing Social Security Scotland benefits and guide them through the application process. Appointments can be arranged at home, in community venues, by video call, or by phone, with locations based on client demand and ensuring coverage across all 32 Local Authorities, including rural areas.

I hope the above information is helpful. If you need any further details or have additional questions following the session, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Yours sincerely,

**KAUKAB STEWART**

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