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20 May 2025

Dear Angela,

## **RESPONSE TO REPORT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL & CULTURAL RIGHTS IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS**

Thank you for our recent meeting where, amongst other matters, we discussed the Commission's spotlight reports and monitoring work. As discussed we welcome the Commission's constructive challenge and support. We have carefully considered the breadth of detail contained in the report the Commission's report on economic, social and cultural rights in the Highlands and Islands. I attach here the Scottish Government's response to the Commission's recommendations.

Our response outlines the wide range of work underway in relation to each recommendation. However, we recognise there is more to be done. We are committed to working collaboratively across the public sector to achieve our aim of ensuring that everyone in Scotland has their human rights respected and fulfilled.

Since its publication, I note the Scottish Parliament held a debate on the report on 16 January 2025, and that the Rural Affairs and Island Committee took evidence from the Commission on 26 February 2025. I have therefore copied this letter to the relevant Parliamentary committees so they are sighted on this response.

Scottish Ministers, special advisers and the Permanent Secretary are covered by the terms of the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016. See [www.lobbying.scot](http://www.lobbying.scot)

Thank you once again and we look forward to continuing to engage with you to progress human rights realisation across the Highlands and Islands, as well as Scotland more widely.

Yours sincerely,

**KAUKAB STEWART**

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# **SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE SCOTTISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION REPORT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL & CULTURAL RIGHTS IN HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS**

## **Overview**

The Scottish Government welcomes the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report on economic, social and cultural rights in the Highlands & Islands. The wide ranging report shines an important light on the specific challenges faced by our rural and island communities in Scotland.

The Scottish Government is committed to building vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive rural and island communities, and to protecting and promoting human rights for all in Scotland.

In the preparation of their report the Commission piloted a new model of human rights monitoring; one that brings together the lived experience of rights-holders with other qualitative and quantitative data, and assesses such evidence against international human rights standards. We note that the Commission plans to expand this model over the coming years to build a baseline picture of economic, social and cultural rights realisation across the breadth of Scotland, and we look forward to engaging with this work.

Through the evidence gathered by its monitoring work, the Commission has made eight recommendations to all relevant duty-bearers to help ensure compliance with Scotland's international human rights obligations. In this response, we set out what action we are taking, or plan to take, in relation to each recommendation. We recognise that there is more to be done to ensure that everyone in Scotland has their human rights fully protected, respected and fulfilled, and we are committed to working collaboratively with all concerned to achieve this aim.

## **Recommendation 1: Strengthen Human Rights Laws and Access to Justice**

*"Economic, social, and cultural rights need legal protection. A strong legal framework is required, which the Scottish Government's proposed Scottish Human Rights Bill may address if introduced. Complaint mechanisms must also be improved to ensure they are accessible, affordable, timely, and effective."*

We are committed to bringing forward a Human Rights Bill in the next Parliamentary session, subject to the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

Proposals for the Bill seek to incorporate the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), along with three other treaties, into Scots law within the limits of devolved competence. ICESCR includes the right to health, the

right to an adequate standard of living (including food and housing), and the right to cultural life, amongst other rights. Our proposals seek to require duty-bearers (those delivering devolved public services) to initially consider the core rights in ICESCR and, in time, to comply with them. It is proposed that relevant duty-bearers will be required to meet basic minimum standards of economic, social and cultural rights, and progressively realise the rights over time. Rights-holders would have the ability to seek remedies when duties in the Bill are not complied with.

It is intended that the Bill will increase accountability for delivering the incorporated economic, social and cultural rights. We want to establish a multi-institutional model of human rights accountability by expanding the powers and remit of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, the Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland, the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and other relevant oversight bodies, alongside empowering Scotland's courts and tribunals to deliver appropriate remedies where the duties in the Bill have not been met.

We plan to publish a discussion paper setting out our approach to the Bill before the 2025 summer recess. The discussion paper will seek to consolidate the outputs of Bill development to date and will support engagement with stakeholders and partners to further test, refine and strengthen proposals in advance of proposed Bill introduction next session. A Human Rights Incorporation & Implementation Delivery Plan has been shared with key stakeholders, including the Commission, to map out the steps for further development of the Bill. We will continue to engage closely with the Commission and other key interests as this work progresses.

## **Recommendation 2: Meet Minimum Core Obligations**

*“Urgent action is needed to eradicate rooflessness and hunger in the Highlands and Islands. Universal access to affordable, acceptable, and quality sexual and reproductive health services must also be prioritised, with resources allocated accordingly.”*

We recognise minimum core obligations (MCOs) are the baseline standard of rights that people need to live a life of dignity. We agree that rights to food, housing and health are of vital importance to everyone across Scotland and are committed to taking action now to advance these fundamental entitlements. We have outlined below some of the key actions the Scottish Government is taking to tackle hunger and rooflessness, and improve access to healthcare services. We also discuss some of the work underway to address wider factors that can act as barriers to the realisation of rights in the Highlands and Islands.

### **Right to food**

The report highlights challenges in accessing sufficient and nutritious food and issues such as food insecurity, high costs, and limited availability in remote areas. We are clear that no one should have to compromise on food or other essentials. We know food insecurity is driven by insufficient and insecure household income, so that

is one of the reasons why the 2025-26 budget has allocated over £3 billion a year to policies which tackle poverty and the cost of living.

Scotland is the first nation in the UK to publish a Cash-First Plan, grounded in human rights, that works towards ending the need for food banks in Scotland. Through [“Cash-First: Towards ending the need for Food Banks in Scotland”](#), we are taking forward nine actions over 2023-2026 to improve the response to crisis, using a Cash-First approach so fewer people need to turn to food parcels. We will continue to provide funding for inclusive community-led responses that maximise dignity and integrate help to reduce future need. This includes a Cash-First Programme to improve urgent access to emergency income when someone has no money for food, which is supported by Scottish Government funding of up to £1.8 million. There are eight Delivery Partners in the Programme, including one in Orkney, delivering advice and cash-first support or systems change initiatives to develop local cash-first pathways.

The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022 provides the framework for our future food strategy that will benefit the well-being and health of the people of Scotland. It places duties on Scottish Ministers and relevant authorities (local authorities and health boards) to produce plans that set out the main outcomes to be achieved in relation to food-related issues, the policies needed to do this and the measures to assess progress. When preparing the plan, Scottish Ministers must have regard to a set of five specific principles that are set out in the Act, one of which states that adequate food is a human right as part of the right to an adequate standard of living and essential to the realisation of other human rights. The first draft of the national Good Food Nation Plan was consulted on in early 2024, the analysis of the responses received was published in September 2024 and the draft Plan is due to be laid in Parliament by the end of June for Parliamentary scrutiny.

## **Right to housing**

The report highlights challenges in accessing adequate housing in the Highlands and Islands, including high costs, limited availability, and poor conditions. The report indicates non-compliance with several indicators, particularly regarding housing adequacy, affordability, and proximity to employment and services, exacerbated by second home ownership and high heating costs in rural areas.

Scotland has strong legal rights for anyone at risk of or experiencing homelessness and everyone is entitled to local authority support and temporary accommodation. Since 2018, we have provided £62.5m to local authorities (this includes over £4.3m for the six local authorities covered in the report) to support the implementation of rapid rehousing transition plans, with an additional £8m allocated in the 2025-26 Scottish Budget. We know that the best way to reduce homelessness is to prevent it before it occurs. The prevention duties in the Housing (Scotland) Bill will place a stronger emphasis on prevention of homelessness, based on the principles of shared public responsibility, earlier intervention and providing more choice and control by supporting people to avoid crisis. We are also making £1m available in

2024-25 to registered social landlords and third sector partners to fund work to help sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness, and will invest an additional £4m in 2025-26 to help local authorities, frontline services and relevant partners to prevent homelessness and prepare for the new duties.

We recognise that good quality, affordable housing is essential to help attract and retain people in Scotland's rural and island communities. We remain focussed on our target of delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, with 70% of these for social rent and at least 10% in rural and island communities, backed by our [Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan](#). In addition to our mainstream investment through the Affordable Housing Supply Programme, demand led funds such as the £30 million Rural and Islands Housing Fund and the £25 million Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers Fund are key elements in addressing specific rural housing issues where they arise.

In addition, making the most of existing housing stock is essential to supporting people to access the housing they need, including enabling people to stay in the communities in which they grew up and supporting local businesses to retain and attract employees. Since 2010, we have invested £3.7 million to fund the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, which has worked together with private owners, local authorities and third sector partners to bring over 11,000 homes back into use. In 2025-26 we have announced a further £2 million to assist local authorities to accelerate the pace these homes become occupied again.

On the impact of availability through second home ownership and tourism, our view is that local authorities are best placed to make decisions about their communities to ensure the right balance is struck between housing demands and tourism businesses to enable thriving economies. This includes deciding the amount of council tax payable on second and long-term empty homes, and whether to introduce short-term let control areas and/ or a visitor levy.

In relation to heating costs, since the publication of our first [Fuel Poverty Strategy](#) in 2021, we have continued to progress action to tackle fuel poverty in line with our statutory targets - which remain the most ambitious in the UK. We will publish our first 3-year statutory fuel poverty periodic report shortly, which is a key milestone in demonstrating the progress made over the last three years through both the actions that were set out in the Strategy and broader actions needed given the changing context to which the Scottish Government has had to respond to since publication in 2021. To ensure the external scrutiny of our approach for tackling fuel poverty and as required under the 2019 Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019, an independent statutory advisory non-departmental public body; [the Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel](#) was established in 2022 which supports the ethos of an evidence-based approach to fuel poverty policy and monitors progress towards meeting the targets.

## **Right to health**

The report highlights challenges in accessing adequate healthcare services in the Highlands and Islands, including shortages of healthcare professionals, long waiting times, and limited availability of specialised services. The report shares concerns including the lack of locally available services, forcing people to travel great distances for basic and complex health services, such as general practitioners, dentistry, mental health services, and more.

We recognise the distinct challenges of remote rural and island areas and are committed to supporting and developing rural Primary Care. We have committed £3.03m over 2023-26 to progressing the National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care, which launched in October 2023. The aim of the Centre is to help reduce remote, rural and island health and wellbeing inequalities through focused work on improving sustainability, capacity and capability of remote, rural and island primary care and community-based workforce and service delivery.

In the last five years, we have successfully delivered facilities that support remote and rural healthcare. This includes, among others, Badenoch and Strathspey Community Hospital, Broadford Hospital (Skye) and substantial investment in the national treatment centres, including National Treatment Centre Highland.

In relation to sexual and maternal health, we continue to take forward work nationally to address the challenges faced by maternity services in rural health boards. Initiatives such as the introduction of model of continuity of care, development of community hubs, and the increased use of Near Me - that allows for remote consultations and appointments where appropriate - all improve the delivery of rural maternity services. The [Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Action Plan](#) includes £1.7m in funding per year, which is additional to health boards' local funding for sexual health services and has been prioritised to a range of work to further the aims of the action plan.

In partnership with the [National Rural Mental Health Forum](#), we are also working to support people in rural areas to maintain good mental health and wellbeing, and access mental health supports where appropriate. As part of this, we are supporting efforts by NHS Boards to promote the use of digital access to services for rural communities. We continue to support the work of the Forum which brings together a wide range of partners to share learning and promote awareness of mental health and wellbeing in rural areas, enabling us to better understand and support rural communities.

### **Additional considerations**

We recognise that addressing issues related to transportation, depopulation and digital connectivity in Scotland's Highlands and Islands are vital to supporting the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights as outlined in the Commission's report. We are taking a number of actions to address these issues as outlined below.

The report identified that a lack of affordable and appropriate transportation can act as a barrier to accessing rights in the Highlands and Islands. We fund a number of initiatives to help make transport affordable, including concessionary travel and discounted fare schemes offering free bus travel for young people, disabled people and everyone over the age of 60, as well as road equivalent tariffs on ferries and discounts on ScotRail season tickets. We continue to look at ways to improve rural transport and, in the coming year, we will publish the final Islands Connectivity Plan, as well as guidance for Bus Services Improvements Partnerships.

We also recognise the unique challenges that the region faces in relation to depopulation. We published our [National Population Strategy](#) in 2021 which sets out a programme of work to address the demographic challenges that Scotland faces at a national and local level. A Ministerial Population Taskforce provides strategic oversight to the delivery of this Strategy. There is a long established, broad consensus for the need for tailored migration solutions which address the unique challenges facing Scotland's communities. Our proposal for a [Rural Visa Pilot](#), published in September 2022, represents a new, community-driven approach to local migration, which would allow rural communities to attract migrants in line with their distinct needs, meeting labour market demands and addressing demographic challenges felt within communities. Our offer is to work with the UK Government and partners to deliver a solution, in the form of this pilot which seeks to simultaneously meet labour market demands and support longer term settlement in these areas to address population decline.

We are delivering on the range of commitments set out within our [Addressing Depopulation Action Plan](#), which was published in February 2024. This includes funding in 2024/25 and 2025/26 to support a range of pathfinder interventions in areas affected by population decline. These interventions are being delivered in areas highlighted by local authorities across the Highlands and Islands, and wider, and aim to support population retention and attraction in these areas, with an overarching aim of delivering communities which are sustainable now and into the future. Interventions include targeted skills delivery aligned to a bespoke childcare offering in Uist, and scoping of novel models of childcare delivery in North West Sutherland to support families to remain in the area. Learning from these pathfinder projects is intended to be used to plan a second phase of funded activity in future financial years.

The report identifies digital connectivity as a barrier to the realisation of economic rights in the Highlands and Islands. Work continues at pace to connect the Highlands and Islands. Our award-winning [Scottish 4G Infill \(S4GI\) programme](#) invested £28.75 million (including £11.27 million of ERDF funding) to provide future-proofed, 4G mobile infrastructure to 55 mobile "notspots" across Scotland. This connectivity is improving everyday life for the communities that our masts serve. Our evaluation of S4GI found that people move into areas served by the programme, that new businesses were created and that access to working from home was improved. We are investing over £600 million in our [Reaching 100% \(R100\) programme](#). The



programme has three strands – our three R100 contracts, the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) and commercial activity. The R100 contracts are expected to connect around 113,000 premises across Scotland. The largest of these contracts, the North contract, has already delivered 16 new fibre optic subsea cables providing future proofed, resilient connectivity to 15 Scottish Islands.

We are playing a leading role in the UK Government’s Project Gigabit in Scotland. This involves managing all local and regional activity in Scotland – as well as jointly managing delivery of a UK-wide Project Gigabit contract, awarded to Openreach. In December 2024, we launched a regional procurement covering Orkney and Shetland – offering over £40 million of public funding to connect up to 13,500 eligible premises. This regional activity, alongside the UK-wide contract, will build on R100 and will drive even more coverage throughout the Highlands and Islands. We have also introduced amendments to the Building Standards system which will require all new housing developments in Scotland to provide gigabit-capable connectivity subject to a cost cap of £2,000 per premise. This legislation came into force from 1 January 2025.

### **Recommendation 3. Improve Service Adequacy**

*“Duty-bearers must enhance the accessibility, availability, acceptability, and quality of services. Strategies should be developed to guide improvements. The monitoring framework in this report can help ensure services meet human rights obligations.”*

In addition to the work highlighted under Recommendation 2, we are generally committed to improving the adequacy of services in the Highlands and Islands, and will continue to support duty-bearers in the region to deliver appropriate, accessible and quality services. We will publish a Rural Delivery Plan and a new National Islands Plan by the end of this Parliament, setting out how we are delivering for our rural and island communities respectively.

We are continuing to develop and deliver a number of activities aimed at embedding human rights awareness and practices in our public services, to help advance rights now and to prepare the public sector for future duties in relation to economic, social and cultural rights. We will look closely at the monitoring and implementation framework developed by the Commission to inform our work here.

### **Recommendation 4. Listen to Communities and Adopt a Human Rights-Based Approach**

*“Duty-bearers should engage with the voices and lived experiences of communities, especially the most vulnerable. A human rights-based approach (HRBA) focused on transparency, collaboration, and people centred services is essential. Policies must consider real-life experiences, not just data.”*

We are committed to involving communities in the development of policy, and recognise that involving people likely to be affected by decisions in the development process results in better decision making. In March 2024, we published our [Participation Handbook](#) which was developed as part of [Scotland’s Open Government commitments](#) to help improve the way people are involved in policy-making and service delivery.

To support the development of proposals for the Human Rights Bill, we received a significant contribution from our Bill Lived Experience Board, comprised of people with experience of facing barriers accessing their rights. This work has been a significant milestone on our journey to ensuring that we are listening better, and earlier, to the views of people with lived experience in our work to develop rights based policies and legislation.

We are engaging with communities and local authorities to inform the new National Islands Plan, expected for publication later this year. As required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the Plan was fully reviewed at the end of 2023, with our review including a public consultation and events held both in-person and online. We will continue to listen to and be guided by islanders while we sustain our efforts to address their needs and ambitions.

We are engaging with relevant stakeholders to inform the Rural Delivery Plan. Our initial engagement has tested the purpose, approach, and ambition of the Plan, via attendance at existing key external stakeholder events, including the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament, the Convention of Highlands and Islands and the Convention of the South of Scotland. We are in the process of reviewing the reports of responses to Scottish Government consultations with a bearing on the Rural Delivery Plan that have been published during the lifetime of this Parliament. This will allow us to gather views on a variety of rural issues, already shared with us, and it will support us to focus our ongoing engagement with stakeholders and communities as effectively as possible. This consultation review will enable us to reflect existing stakeholder engagement, needs and priorities in the Rural Delivery Plan without duplicating existing efforts.

We continue to deliver Community Led Local Development (CLLD), our replacement for the EU LEADER programme in Scotland, in rural and island areas. Taking a place-based approach, it continues the LEADER approach, which delivered funding for community-led projects via Local Action Groups for 30 years. Through the programme, communities are empowered and supported to design and implement the solutions to the challenges and opportunities they identify in their local area. During 2025/26, an externally commissioned review of CLLD will examine its strategic fit in relation to wider public and third sector interventions, and identify its

unique role and impact, including any gaps or areas of duplication. It will also consider and propose options for its future role, focus and delivery.

Scotland is the only part of the UK that has a Rural Parliament, and our most recent Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament was held in Fort William in November 2023, where a democratic assembly of over 500 participants attended from across rural and island Scotland. The Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament aims to empower rural communities across Scotland, giving them a stronger voice to initiate change at a local and national level. Scotland has also recently been confirmed as the host of the 6th European Rural Parliament, taking place in autumn 2025 in Aberdeenshire. It will be the first time a non-EU member state hosts the event.

## **Recommendation 5. Flexible and Localised Policies**

*“Policies should be adaptable to the specific needs of remote and rural areas. Learning from Nordic countries’ success in realising economic, social, and cultural rights in rural settings could offer valuable insights, especially in housing, health, and education. Programmes should be tailored to address local challenges.”*

We recognise the need for policies that are responsive to the specific needs of remote and rural communities. As highlighted in response to recommendation 3, we are currently developing a Rural Delivery Plan. This will set out the range of actions that government is, and will be, taking which impact our rural mainland communities. This is a key opportunity to take a fresh look at how we can work together to bring about change and address the issues that we face in rural Scotland. The Rural Delivery Plan will compile existing and planned strategies and investments to focus on what is being delivered for rural Scotland. The Plan will cover a broad range of sectors, including housing, agriculture, marine, land reform, transport, social justice, population, digital connectivity, and economic development, as well as skills and health and social care.

We recently launched a Rural Assessment Toolkit to provide a systematic approach to ensure the specific opportunities and challenges of rural communities are considered in our policymaking. The toolkit is a means for policy teams across Scottish Government to identify the impacts of their policy on rural areas, engage appropriately and then assess the implications of their policy, before then considering possible policy adjustments.

The new National Islands Plan, which will be published separately this year, will set out how we will deliver for our island communities. We are already working with island communities, local authorities and other partners to ensure the new Plan continues to deliver on our vision for thriving, sustainable and successful island communities. Through these engagements, we know that improved access to housing and healthcare, as well as goods & services, will be vital components of the new Plan.

Funding is also being provided to support the specific needs of island communities. The Island Programme Capital Fund supports the six island local authorities to fund locally developed infrastructure projects that align with the Strategic Objectives of the National Islands Plan. Since its first funding round in 2021-22, the Islands Programme has distributed just over £15 million in support of 71 projects across 51 different islands. The 2025-26 budget includes a further £5.3 million to continue the Programme. Through this fund we have already supported projects focused on improved access to housing, healthcare and other key services, including £700,000 for new Worker Accommodation in Mull, £450,000 to help modernise the Tiree Community Care Hub, and £157,265 for the first phase of the Thomson Court Care Home Expansion on the Isle of Bute.

The Commission references the approach taken in Nordic nations and suggest the Scottish Government explores integrated models. We would welcome further engagement with the Commission on this point with a view to highlighting specific examples of good practice.

## **Recommendation 6. Assess Policy Impact on Highlands and Islands**

*“Mechanisms like the Island Impact Assessment should be expanded to include non-island communities. Human rights considerations must be embedded in all policy assessments, with parliamentary scrutiny to ensure laws and policies take into account the needs of the Highlands and Islands.”*

As discussed in response to recommendation 5, we recently launched a Rural Assessment Toolkit to support a systematic approach across Government to considering rural needs throughout the policy development process. The toolkit complements our existing suite of assessment tools such as the Island Communities Impact Assessment, Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment, Equality Impact Assessment and the Fairer Scotland Duty Impact Assessment. Together, these tools help to ensure that human rights considerations and the unique needs of our rural and islands communities are taken into account during policy development and delivery.

More broadly, we are committed to respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights for everyone in Scottish society. This is central to Scotland’s [National Performance Framework](#) and covers the entire spectrum of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. The Scottish Ministerial Code expresses the overarching duty on Scottish Ministers to comply with the law, including international law and treaty obligations.

Our forthcoming Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy will support the Scottish Government, and wider Scottish public sector, to embed equality and human rights across the public sector. The Strategy and supporting action plan and toolkit will be published later in 2025.

## Recommendation 7. Create Specific Targets for Human Rights

*“Concrete, targeted objectives should be developed to progressively improve human rights, with well-thought-out plans covering short, medium, and long-term goals.”*

The advancement of human rights – particularly for those furthest from realising their rights – is central to this government’s priority missions of eradicating child poverty, building excellent public services and tackling climate change. The [25-26 Programme for Government](#) outlines the actions we plan to take to make Scotland a fairer and more equal country for all.

As noted under recommendation 6, our [National Performance Framework](#) indicators help us to understand and track progress towards delivering on our human rights outcome in the Framework. Following a recent statutory review of the National Outcomes, and the subsequent Scottish Parliament inquiry, we have committed to a period of reform of the Framework to support the development and implementation of a more strategic and impactful framework for Scotland. However, the current outcomes are still in operation as is the duty on public bodies to have regard to them.

Our Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy, due to be published later in 2025, will be accompanied by a supporting action plan and toolkit, and align with wider equality and human rights work such as the improvement activity in relation to the effectiveness of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland, development of the proposed Human Rights Bill and recommendations of the First Minister’s National Advisory Council on Women and Girls.

In April 2025, we published our new [equality outcomes](#) under the Public Sector Equality Duty, setting the direction for the 2025–2029 reporting period. These new outcomes focus on the enablers of system change and are centred around three key areas: (i) equality evidence, (ii) lived experience and participation, and (iii) equality and other relevant impact assessments. To support these outcomes, we have outlined a series of short- and long-term actions that will guide our work and be regularly reviewed to ensure they remain responsive to Scotland’s evolving policy landscape.

We shared a Human Rights Incorporation & Implementation Delivery Plan with key partners which sets out how we will drive forward development of proposals for the Human Rights Bill, and how we will advance wider human rights implementation measures in the short term. The Plan provides clear deliverables and milestones until March 2026.

Proposals for the Human Rights Bill include mechanisms to help promote transparency and accountability for delivering on human rights by requiring Scottish Ministers and public bodies to report on steps taken and action planned in relation to

the duties and rights in the Bill.. We plan to publish a discussion paper on our policy proposals for the Bill before the 2025 summer recess.

## **Recommendation 8. Human Rights Budgeting**

*“Given limited resources, duty-bearers should adopt human rights budgeting to allocate resources more effectively and fulfil human rights obligations. This will ensure the best use of available resources to achieve maximum impact.”*

We remain committed to ensuring our policy decisions advance equality and human rights for all of Scotland’s people, and to embedding the three key principles of human rights budgeting - transparency, accountability and participation - into our budget process.

We will further embed equality and human rights within all stages of the budget process, and the publication and continuing improvements of the Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement alongside the Scottish Budget is evidence of this commitment. To aid understanding of how our policies are reducing inequality and targeting support at those who need it most, we publish a distributional analysis of how the decisions on tax and social security impact households of different income levels and characteristics.

We have also produced an equality statement alongside the Budget every year since 2009, with changes to the most recent [Equality and Fairer Scotland Budget Statement](#) focussed on improving how evidence feeds into the budget decision-making process, and how key decisions can be communicated more clearly. We continue to work with the Equality and Human Rights Budget Advisory group and to deliver on the group’s 2021 [recommendations](#) to make changes to our processes and systems.

We are committed to continually improving transparency in our public finances. We have built in Budget transparency improvement actions through successive Open Government National Action Plans, and we are taking forward work with the Parliament and its committees to identify how we can continue to improve the understanding of public finances and the wider Scottish Budget.

We recently responded to The Open Budget Survey Report by the Commission. Following this, officials had further discussion with the Commission to support our approach to budget work. The results of the survey, furthered by the discussion, have been helpful in illustrating the improvements made, as well as highlighting where we have further to go. The work is beneficial and it has been useful to gain this independent perspective; we are pleased to note that Scotland is one of the countries where progress has been made.

Publishing information is the baseline for participation and transparency, and we continue to improve the information we produce for the Scottish Budget each year to support analysis and wider understanding. For this Budget, twenty-seven supporting documents and associated publications were published – these documents are signposted in [Annex D of the Budget](#) to help deliver improved transparency.

We recognise that there remains more to do, so we are committed to continual improvement, including reviewing the information that is published alongside the Scottish Budget.

## **Conclusion**

The Scottish Government is grateful for the comprehensive and insightful report provided by the Scottish Human Rights Commission, into the realisation of economic, social and cultural rights in Scotland's Highlands and Islands.

We note the challenges outlined in the report and have sought in this document to outline the work we are doing in relation to its eight recommendations. The Commission's findings will be crucial in guiding our ongoing efforts to enhance our policies and practices to secure better rights realisation in the Highlands and Islands. We are committed to working with stakeholders, including the Commission, to address the issues raised and implementing the necessary changes to ensure progress on further realising the economic, social and cultural rights of those who make up Scotland's Highlands and Islands communities.