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Dear Convener,

Thank you again for the opportunity in November last year to give evidence to the Committee as part of its inquiry into human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland. I am grateful to the Committee for its thoughtful and diligent work throughout this parliamentary session in exploring these matters in more depth. While human rights belong to everyone, we recognise that geography can shape the lived experience of those rights across different parts of Scotland.

I attach the Scottish Government's response to the Committee's report following its inquiry, which has been agreed with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands. It sets out the measures this Government has taken to support equality and the better realisation of human rights in everyday life for our rural and island communities.

However, I know there is more to do, and the Scottish Government is committed to working with all public sector partners to drive progress for Scotland's rural and island communities.

Yours sincerely,

**KAUKAB STEWART**

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# 1. Acknowledgement and Overall Position

## Introduction

The Scottish Government welcomes the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's increasing focus on rurality during the 2021-26 parliamentary session. A key strand of this work has been the Committee's recent inquiry into human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland.

On 20 February 2026, the Committee published a final report following its inquiry, providing a high-level overview of the key issues as raised by stakeholders in evidence. This is the Scottish Government's response to that report.

As the Committee notes, the issues highlighted are clearly wide-ranging and cross-cutting, and there are a significant number of public bodies with responsibilities for service design and delivery in rural Scotland who have a role to play here. This response, therefore, has a particular focus on the Committee's conclusions and recommendations most relevant to the Scottish Government, in a way that mirrors the report's structure. It should be noted that future decisions following the 2026 Scottish Parliament election will be for the government that forms the next administration.

## Background

A consistent and important theme in the Committee's scrutiny has been the way rurality shapes lived experience and the need for cross-cutting policy objectives to fully consider human rights and equalities impacts in rural and island settings. The Committee's focus reflects the Scottish Government's own longstanding recognition that island and rural mainland communities can experience distinct challenges linked to geography, connectivity and scale, which often require bespoke policy solutions.

We note that the Committee's inquiry benefitted from the contribution of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, whose November 2024 report highlighted the ways in which economic, social and cultural rights are experienced across rural Scotland, especially in the Highlands and Islands where access to healthcare, housing, food, affordable energy and reliable transport can at times be challenging. The Scottish Government responded to the Commission's report in May 2025 and notes the Commission's plans to report next on economic, social and cultural rights in the South of Scotland region.

Further, we recognise the Committee's own engagement with stakeholders on these matters, as demonstrated through its informal engagement session in Blairgowrie on 10 November, its oral evidence sessions and the topical written submissions it has received. The Minister for Equalities gave evidence to the Committee on 25 November 2025, followed by further evidence in a letter dated 17 December 2025.

## The Challenge

Rural Scotland presents a varied landscape, with communities experiencing opportunities and pressures differently depending on geography, population patterns

and access to key services. This diversity is equally evident across Scotland's island communities, where factors such as transport connectivity, population pressures and smaller labour markets can shape the way policies and services are experienced locally. While many rural and island areas demonstrate remarkable resilience and strong community networks, they continue to face persistent challenges particularly relating to housing, transport, healthcare and the cost of living.

Engagement with islanders and rural residents has repeatedly underlined the importance of supporting people to stay, return or settle, and the need for approaches that reflect the distinct circumstances of each place. This diversity reinforces why tailored, place-based and community-led solutions are essential to ensuring that all rural and island communities - whether remote, dispersed or more accessible - have the opportunity to thrive socially and economically.

Our approach to improving access to services for our rural and island communities is grounded in a human-rights-based and community-led model of policymaking that places the experiences of rural and island residents at the centre, reinforced through statutory mechanisms such as Island Communities Impact Assessments, and the voluntary rural assessment. This supports geography, connectivity, demographic pressures and local context being considered from the earliest stages of development, helping to shape decisions that genuinely reflect the realities of rural and island life.

## **2. Response to Key Themes, Overarching Issues and Interconnectedness**

### **Committee report paragraph 9**

*The Committee reiterates its "sincere disappointment" that a Human Rights Bill was not introduced during the session. We note the Minister's letter of 13 January 2026 which confirms that the Scottish Government remains "committed to introducing the Bill in the next Parliamentary session." In order to facilitate thorough scrutiny, and bearing in mind the work that has already been done during the current session, the Committee would like to see such a bill laid at the earliest opportunity.*

As set out in the Minister for Equalities' letter of 13 January 2026, the Scottish Government intends to bring forward a new Human Rights Bill in the next Parliamentary session, subject to the outcome of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election. The Scottish Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the substantial work undertaken to develop, test and refine the proposals to date, and appreciates the thoughtful scrutiny that has supported this process. Engagement on our proposals has been supported by the publication of a detailed Discussion Paper in July 2025. Central to our considerations has been the delivery of legislation that is clear, accessible and workable, and which sits firmly within devolved competence. The progress we have made so far on these issues through engagement on the Bill's Discussion Paper will provide a strong platform going forward.

In the meantime, we are continuing our work with public sector partners to deliver a range of activities aimed at strengthening human rights awareness and practice

across our public services, helping to build appropriate foundations for any future introduction and implementation of the Bill.

### **Committee report paragraph 23**

*The Committee welcomes the work being undertaken within the Scottish Government to ensure a more strategic approach to interconnected issues spanning multiple policy areas. However, the Committee is concerned that evidence from local stakeholders suggests that this work has yet to result in concrete improvements “on the ground.” It appears that siloed working within different Scottish Government departments remains an issue which prevents the full realisation of rights in many rural areas as considered later in this report.*

The Scottish Government is committed to supporting our rural communities by developing robust policies that capitalise on the unique opportunities these areas offer, supporting the realisation of rights on the ground. In 2025, we launched a voluntary Rural Assessment Toolkit to promote a consistent, government-wide approach to considering rural needs during policy development. A core element of this approach is ensuring that all Scottish Government policy areas are effectively connected throughout the policy-making process, fostering joined-up working, preventing siloed approaches, and ensuring that policies across government operate symbiotically.

This approach complements the existing statutory Island Communities Impact Assessment processes introduced through the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, which requires relevant authorities to consider whether policies, strategies or services are likely to have a significantly different effect on island communities, from their effect on other communities, and helping ensure that both rural and island considerations are embedded across government. Together with the commitments set out in the National Islands Plan<sup>1</sup>, these mechanisms help ensure that island considerations are embedded across policy development and implementation.

More broadly, we are working to embed equality and human rights across government and the wider public sector through our Mainstreaming Framework, complemented by ongoing work to enhance the effectiveness of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland.

An example of the Scottish Government taking a more strategic approach to interconnected issues across multiple policy areas is the 2026-27 Strategic Integrated Impact Assessment (SIIA), which covered the Budget, the Spending Review and the Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline. For the first time, the SIIA brought all impact assessments together into a single process to develop a holistic understanding of our fiscal decisions. The SIIA covers five duties: Public Sector Equality Duty; Fairer Scotland Duty; Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment; Consumer Duty; and Island Communities Impact Assessment. It also included the piloting of several innovative approaches to analysis, including specific analysis of cross-government measures on child poverty. This new approach is currently being

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<sup>1</sup> [National Islands Plan - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/national-islands-plan)

evaluated, with results expected in the spring, and publication to be confirmed post-election.

#### **Committee report paragraph 24**

*The Committee notes that the Minister’s role in encouraging her colleagues to fully consider and mainstream issues relating to the realisation of human rights in rural areas appears to have largely been undertaken on an informal and ad hoc basis. We therefore recommend that the next administration puts in place more concrete arrangements to ensure that this is done on a strategic and structured basis in future.*

The Minister for Equalities continues to promote and embed equality and human rights considerations across government and provides support and constructive challenge to colleagues across Cabinet and ministerial portfolios. These discussions have helped maintain a clear and shared understanding of the links between portfolios and ensured that Ministers remain mindful of the crosscutting nature of these themes. Strengthening the quality and use of Equality Impact Assessments has also been central to encouraging earlier and more consistent consideration of equalities issues throughout policy development.

Regarding the recommendation, this is a matter for the next administration to consider following the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

## **2.1 Financial Pressures and the “Rural Premium”**

#### **Committee report paragraph 30**

*The Committee is acutely aware of the higher than average cost of living in rural communities or the “rural premium.” It also recognises the complex and interconnected nature of contributory factors and that it is unrealistic to expect them to be resolved overnight. However, we agree that more needs to be done and invite the Scottish Government to respond to suggestions from the Scottish Poverty Alliance that targeted measures on energy costs, transport, housing, and service provision are required.*

The Scottish Government is committed to reducing rural poverty and existing economic, social and environmental inequalities across rural Scotland. Actions in these areas are elaborated in more detail between sections 2.2 to 2.7.

One overarching example is the Scottish Government’s Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund, which was established in December 2022 in recognition of the additional cost of living pressures facing island households. Since then, it has already invested £4.4 million via island local authorities to provide targeted, locally informed interventions for islanders most affected by the cost crisis. Tangible and impactful initiatives supported by the Fund to date include winter payments to low-income families, Christmas meals, food bank grants, Love Local food vouchers and free school breakfasts. We have confirmed that the Fund will continue in 2026-27.

## 2.2 Transport and Access to Services

### **Committee report paragraph 35**

*The Committee recognises the challenges in providing public transport services, particularly for smaller, more isolated communities where revenue from fares is less likely to cover costs. This also applies to commercial operators who are unlikely to operate unprofitable routes without public subsidy.*

### **Committee report paragraph 36**

*However, the Committee is clear that adequate transport is essential to the full realisation of ESC rights in rural communities and strongly recommends that the Scottish Government sets out the actions it is currently taking to support the viability of such services and any additional steps it intends to take in the future.*

The Scottish Government is taking forward a range of actions to strengthen transport for rural and island communities, including progressing the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness, advancing improvements along the A96 corridor, and delivering key resilience measures at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful, to enhance long-term connectivity. We have also introduced new digital tools, such as the recently launched Traveline Scotland website and app, to improve journey-planning and support more sustainable travel. Recognising the challenges faced by rural and island communities, the Scottish Government is working with operators and local authorities to ensure accessible ferry, air and public transport services despite financial pressures, helping maintain vital links to employment, healthcare, education and essential goods.

Below are some of the accessible travel schemes and actions that the Scottish Government is taking to support transport services, which are particularly relevant to rural and island communities.

#### Bus services

- In 2026-27, we will provide almost £50 million to support current bus services so that operators can continue providing access to affordable transport.
- We will also invest £4 million in 2026-27 to support Local Transport Authorities to build business cases for local bus improvements through franchising, using the powers created in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019.
- Local authorities also have a duty (Transport Act 1985) to identify where there is a social need for particular bus services and can subsidise these at their discretion – we provide funding through the general revenue grant to help them do so and in 2023-24 they spent £56 million doing so.
- Through legislation, we have given local authorities powers on partnership working, franchising and running their own bus services. Our approach enables local transport authorities to determine how to best to address transport challenges in their local areas.
- 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, eligible disabled people and everyone aged 60 and over,

- We are piloting a bus fare cap across the Highlands and Islands. This includes the £2 bus fare cap pilot, which commenced on 30 January in Shetland, will last 12 months, and will hopefully encourage more people to choose to travel by bus for work, study and leisure. The next phase of the pilot commenced in the Western Isles on 23 February 2026 and Orkney on 9 March 2026, and the remaining Highlands area from 23 March 2026.

### Rail services

- Public ownership has created the opportunity to deliver a railway which is run for the benefit of passengers. The ability to plan for the long term brings with it the opportunity to modernise Scotland's railway and deliver efficient and sustainable passenger services.
- From September last year, Scotland became the only part of the UK to remove peak fares, the biggest reform to rail fares in decades and equivalent to an average reduction across all ScotRail ticket types of around 17%. The Scottish Government made the removal of ScotRail peak fares possible with a significant investment of up to £35 million in 2026-27.
- As announced by the First Minister on 12 February 2026, all ScotRail fares will be frozen for twelve months from 1 April 2026, including Season Tickets and Flexipasses.

### Aviation

- The Air Discount Scheme was introduced by the Scottish Government in 2006 to mitigate the impact of high air fares and to improve social inclusion in the most peripheral parts of the Highlands and Islands. The scheme provides residents of the eligible area with a 50% discount on the core ticket price on eligible routes. The discount applies regardless of the price of the ticket and there is no limit on the number of discounts members can receive. Ministers recently announced that the scheme will continue until at least 31 March 2027.
- We understand the importance of aviation to the Highlands and Islands, which is why the Scottish Government provides funding to support the operations of Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (HIAL). HIAL operates 11 airports at Barra, Benbecula, Campbeltown, Dundee, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Tiree and Wick. The Scottish Government will make up to £52.3 million available to HIAL in 2026-27 to ensure that HIAL can continue to operate safe and regulatory compliant airports.
- The Scottish Government is committed to the continuation of the Glasgow to Campbeltown, Tiree and Barra air service, as we recognise the vital role they play for these communities. This commitment is demonstrated by the £30.91 million subsidy provided to enable services to operate between October 2023 to October 2027.

### Ferries

- We offer Road Equivalent Tariffs (RET) on ferries. The introduction of RET by this Government has already significantly reduced ferry fares on the Clyde and Hebrides network and saved ferry travellers around £25 million per year. We are committed to fully retaining RET for islanders and non-islanders alike.

- From 24 March 2026 islanders will benefit from the removal of mid and peak season fares on the Northern Isles Ferry Services.
- As part of the Scottish Budget for 2026/27, £1.8 million will be invested in the lifeline ferry services, currently run by Serco NorthLink, to reduce fares for islanders to low season rates, making travel more affordable year-round.
- The Scottish Government fully recognises the importance of lifeline ferry links in keeping communities across the Northern Isles connected with family, work and leisure opportunities on the Scottish mainland. By removing mid and peak seasonal fares for islanders, we are continuing to invest in making ferry travel more affordable and saving people money.
- As set out in the Islands Connectivity Plan, we took action last year to introduce free travel for under 22s on inter-island services within Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, as well as extending the existing 4 journeys per year scheme for Scottish mainland travel to under 22s. This was warmly welcomed by local communities and stakeholders.

Taken together, the targeted and concrete actions outlined above demonstrate the Scottish Government's clear commitment to supporting both the viability and accessibility of transport across rural and island Scotland. Through sustained investment, strengthened local authority powers, and practical initiatives to sustain services and keep fares affordable, we are working with partners to ensure that communities, regardless of location, can rely on transport networks that meet their needs and enable full participation in everyday life.

## 2.3 Community Led Solutions, Funding Stability and Co-Production

### **Committee report paragraph 53**

*The Committee recognises the invaluable contribution that community-led organisations often make towards helping sustain rural communities and maintaining access to services through initiatives such as community transport. The Committee also notes that such services can be more cost effective than public sector alternatives in some localities although they cannot replace them entirely. However, the Committee is clear that such initiatives cannot be sustained or upscaled without adequate, long-term and sustainable funding and support. It is not acceptable for essential services in rural areas to be dependent on the goodwill of volunteers alone.*

We know that third sector organisations often lead the way in transforming and delivering person- and community-centred services in Scotland, and we greatly value these vital contributions, just as we value the people across the country who give their time to volunteer within their communities; however, we also recognise that essential services cannot depend on volunteers alone. To thrive, third sector organisations need stability, support, and the opportunity to grow their capacity, which is why moving away from annual funding cycles towards multiyear grant funding is such an important step in strengthening their resilience, and why increasing the availability of multiyear funding opportunities sits at the heart of our Fairer Funding Principles.

The Scottish Government also recognises the need for closer alignment between health planning and transport planning. To support this, the Transport to Health Delivery Plan was published on 30 October 2024. Among its commitments is the requirement for Transport Scotland to encourage Regional Transport Partnerships to establish stakeholder groups with a remit for Transport to Health, including representation from local NHS Boards.

We also support community transport by allocating resources to local authorities through the local government finance settlement, funding the Community Transport Association Scotland to maintain, reinstate and establish services, and investing in zero-emission vehicles through the £4 million Plugged in Communities (PiC) fund in 2025–26, enabling the procurement of 56 zero-emission vehicles. Additional support is available through the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programme, which supports community-driven transport initiatives that sustain local assets, strengthen long-term capacity, and ensure that local voices shape local place planning and decision-making.

#### **Committee report paragraph 54**

*The Committee strongly agrees that communities are best placed to identify local need, prioritise accordingly and come up with their own solutions. Such solutions should then be explored and put in place, wherever possible, through a coproduction approach with public sector partners. It is therefore essential that community-led organisations and other third sector groups have “a seat at the table” right from the start of the policy development process so that their voices can be heard and listened to.*

We know that rural Scotland is diverse, with regions and communities facing distinct challenges that they are often best placed to address, and stakeholders have emphasised the need for national policies to fit rural needs and build on what works locally. As such, early and meaningful engagement with the right stakeholders is vital to ensuring rural voices shape the policies that affect them, helping to avoid unintended consequences and strengthen outcomes for rural areas. The Scottish Government’s Rural Stakeholder Group plays an important role in guiding rural policy, bringing expertise from across the public, private and third sectors, supported by wider channels such as the Scottish Rural Network.

The development of our new National Islands Plan has also been informed by extensive engagement with island communities, local authorities and a wide range of delivery partners. Under an overarching population retention and attraction objective, the Plan introduces a set of targeted actions across portfolios designed to empower island communities. It places strong emphasis on avoiding prescriptive top-down statements, instead setting out commitments designed to provide national-level support for solutions developed and delivered locally, in ways that are meaningful for the communities involved.

We recognise the importance of supporting the development of thriving rural communities and have invested over £38 million of Community Led Local Development (CLLD) funding since the closure of LEADER in December 2021, delivering more than 1,360 grassroots community-led projects across rural and

island Scotland. We deliver the CLLD programme in partnership with 20 Local Action Groups, including 9 Youth Local Action Groups, who are the local decision makers for awarding funding to projects according to their needs.

Furthermore, The Disability Equality Plan recognises that disabled people in rural and island communities often face distinct barriers including limited access to services, reduced local provision and greater isolation and therefore highlights the need to ensure support is shaped by lived experience and delivered as close to communities as possible. The Improving Access Fund puts this principle into practice by making rural and island reach a core funding priority, directing investment towards peer-led and community-based organisations that understand local needs and can design tailored, accessible solutions.

A total of 33 organisations have been funded across urban, rural and island areas, with a strong focus on rural and island communities including the Western Isles, Shetland, Orkney, Argyll & Bute, Dumfries & Galloway and Highland , enabling disabled people in remote areas to benefit from strengthened advocacy, improved access to advice and participation opportunities, and more resilient local provision. Through this approach, the Disability Equality Plan empowers disabled people living in rural Scotland to have a meaningful voice in shaping policy and to access support that reflects the realities of their communities.

#### **Committee report paragraph 55**

*The Committee is aware that the subject of multi-year funding for third sector organisations has been raised repeatedly by committees throughout this and previous sessions. The Committee therefore strongly welcomes the Fairer Funding pilot and agrees with the Minister that it is an “important first step.” We recommend that this pilot should be built upon and expanded as soon as possible.*

Building upon the fairer funding pilot and to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to advancing disability equality, our recent budget confirmed a £3.5 million multiyear investment in disability equality. This funding provides long-term certainty for Disabled People’s Organisations and disabled leaders, helping to build and strengthen capacity across the DPO sector. It will further empower disabled people, enhance leadership, and support greater participation and inclusion in communities and national life.

#### **Committee report paragraph 56**

*Whilst the Committee recognises that it will not be possible to guarantee secure, multi-year funding for all third sector organisations under existing fiscal arrangements, it invites the Scottish Government to confirm the timescales under which the pilot is operating and to update the Committee on its impact and lessons learned at an appropriate point. The Scottish Government is therefore invited to confirm when such an analysis will be made available.*

Our Fairer Funding Pilot, launched in April 2025 to support delivery of the government’s priority of eradicating child poverty, has provided over £130 million in multi-year funding to third sector organisations for 2025-26 and 2026-27. The Pilot

consists of 51 government grants to third sector organisations, some of which provide services to rural areas, such as Scottish Mountain Rescue, Scottish Book Trust which delivers Bookbug and the Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund which is delivered by Third Sector Interface's across Scotland.

It is essential that we learn from the Pilot, and use the feedback and evidence gathered on the impact of the Pilot to inform policy decisions going forward. As a first step, we published the [Fairer Funding Pilot Feedback Survey](#) in November 2025. This aimed to gather initial feedback from the organisations participating in the Pilot and adds to our evidence base, which we will use to further embed our fairer funding commitment within third sector grant making.

**Committee report paragraph 57**

*The Committee also welcomes the further initiatives listed by the Minister which it hopes will help further embed a local approach and bring parity of esteem to third sector partners. We recommend that our successor committee continues to monitor progress towards this end in the next parliamentary session.*

We recognise the essential role the third sector plays in delivering vital support for communities across Scotland and in driving forward our Public Service Reform agenda. To ensure the sector has the stability and opportunity needed for long-term planning and development, the Scottish Government will work with third sector partners to develop a new Third Sector Partnership that strengthens the sector's role and influence. This partnership will build on progress made through our Fairer Funding commitments, establish clear principles for future collaboration, and embed a more consistent approach to working together, with co-design planned for the next Scottish Parliament.

## **2.4 Economic Rights (Work, Childcare, Digital Connectivity)**

**Committee report paragraph 70**

*The Committee recognises the interconnected nature of multiple challenges in rural areas which can act as barriers to employment which, in turn, can lead to increased poverty levels, thus creating a "vicious circle." Whilst they will vary depending on local circumstances, they may include access to adequate transport links, digital connections, childcare services, healthcare, housing, training and employment opportunities themselves.*

We recognise the inherent interconnectedness of the challenges and opportunities facing rural Scotland, where social, economic and environmental factors consistently influence one another, requiring these issues to be understood and addressed collectively rather than in isolation. For example, we know that we cannot grow the rural economy or address depopulation without a good supply of homes. The following paragraphs outline the actions the Scottish Government is taking to support childcare services, digital connectivity and employment opportunities, with healthcare, housing and transport covered separately.

## Childcare

We invest around £1 billion annually in the delivery of 1140 hours of high quality funded Early Learning and Childcare to all three and four-year-olds, 5 year olds whose entry to primary school has been deferred, and eligible two-year-olds. We also have a two-year-old offer targeted at children with experience of socio-economic disadvantage and responds to evidence that children experiencing the most disadvantage have the most to gain from early access to high quality ELC.

We recognise the particular and distinct challenges, barriers and opportunities for rural and island communities and will continue to identify, develop and enable place-based solutions to navigate the challenges they face. Responsibility for delivering the 1140 hours of funded Early Learning and Childcare that are available to all eligible children in Scotland sits with councils, who have a statutory duty to ensure that local provision meets families' needs.

Across Scotland, several work programmes are underway to support childcare access in rural and island communities. This includes:

- Funding the national childminder recruitment and retention programme, which is now active across 30 local authorities.
- Making grants available to local authorities via the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) Fund, two of which have focused on addressing childcare challenges in areas affected by acute population decline.
- Continuing our investment into our Early Adopter Communities (EACs), including those in rural and island locations. This is allowing us to test and understand the particular challenges and opportunities that present themselves in rural and island areas.

## Digital connectivity

High-quality digital infrastructure is essential to supporting inclusive growth, community resilience, and enabling residents and businesses to participate fully in Scotland's digital economy. Although responsibility for telecommunications rests with the UK Government, ongoing Scottish Government investments in digital infrastructure have contributed to a step change in broadband coverage across Scotland, with over a million improved connections delivered in the past decade. Much of this progress has been delivered through Scottish Government programmes – from the legacy Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) rollout to the current Reaching 100% (R100) programme. The Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) offers subsidies of up to £5,000 for premises not included in commercial or publicly subsidised build plans.

As of January 2026, over 69,000 connections have been delivered in rural Scotland through both the R100 contracts and SBVS. The R100 programme has also delivered 16 subsea cables, enabling over 12,000 premises on 15 islands to be connected to full fibre broadband. We are already seeing benefits of this investment, with an interim evaluation of the R100 programme showing access to better connectivity has boosted productivity for 76% of business surveyed, and strengthened resilience for households and communities.

Alongside this, the Scottish Government is playing a leading role in delivering Project Gigabit in Scotland, using funding from the UK Government. Our involvement in Project Gigabit has created opportunities to align the ongoing delivery of R100 with that of Project Gigabit, generating efficiencies across both programmes, reducing local disruption, and driving coverage even further into rural and island locations.

Despite these gains, the Scottish Government recognises there is still more to do. Building connectivity in Scotland's rural areas is more complex and costly than in urban areas, and needs flexibility to deliver effectively. This is why we are continuing to urge the UK Government to match our ambition so that we can maximise Scotland's gigabit coverage, ensuring as many communities as possible can experience the benefits of fast, resilient digital connectivity.

### Employment opportunities

No One Left Behind is our shared approach to delivering an all-age, place-based, person-centred model of employability support in Scotland. It promotes a strengthened partnership approach where Scottish and Local Government work together with public, private, and third sector organisations to design and deliver services. Through this approach, the Scottish Government funds a range of initiatives in rural areas that focus on removing key barriers to employment by providing tailored, practical support.

This includes initiatives in rural areas that have expanded childcare provision by supporting parents to become self-employed childminders; helping individuals in housing arrears through collaboration with Discretionary Housing Payments teams; and reducing transport barriers by providing Stagecoach travel vouchers alongside broader financial assistance to enable access to training and employment opportunities.

#### **Committee report paragraph 71**

*Whilst the Committee also recognises that these challenges will not be resolved overnight, we heard examples of initiatives and proposals that appear to be working well or have the potential to do so, including:*

- *The multi-agency Uist and Barra childcare forum;*
- *Suggested "hyper-local" initiatives for enterprise, employment and skills development;*
- *The potential for investing in local digital hubs;*
- *Suggestions that local and national government departments dealing with rural and island issues should be located in the communities they support to a greater degree than is currently the case.*

### **Committee report paragraph 72**

*The Committee is clear that there is an urgent need for initiatives that have been proven to work well in communities to be learned from. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to reflect upon and respond to these suggestions and confirm whether they have the potential to be rolled out more broadly and under what timescales. We further invite the Scottish Government to provide detail of any other innovative approaches it may be considering that have been demonstrated to work for local communities.*

We are keen to learn from local initiatives that are showing innovation in practice, and to understand how communities themselves are developing solutions that work for their specific circumstances, including those that the Committee highlights in its report. Decisions on any future initiatives will be subject to the outcome of the Scottish Parliament election.

Some examples of innovative approaches we have noted include:

- The way in which the local authority in Orkney partners with the Blide Trust to deliver life skills training for care-experienced young people and works with the Health and Social Care Partnership to create supported work experience placements for people with disabilities, complemented by one-to-one Key Worker support.
- In the Western Isles, Sectoral Routeways in areas such as construction, care and hospitality help individuals build industry knowledge, job skills and work experience.
- In Shetland, support for people with learning difficulties or autism is delivered through the established Project Search programme, while the Community Bike Project provides volunteering opportunities and Key Worker support for individuals experiencing challenges such as poor mental health, substance misuse or offending histories.

Regarding the suggestion that local and national departments dealing with rural and island issues should be located in the communities they support, the Scottish Government's Rural and Islands teams include staff located from the Western Isles, islands in Argyll and Bute, Orkney and Caithness to rural Perthshire, Clackmannanshire and Fife. Many other rural economy-related teams such as marine, agriculture and regional economy are also geographically dispersed.

## **2.5 Social Rights – Right to Social Security**

### **Committee report paragraph 77**

*The Committee recognises the complexity of the social security system. Ideally, the Committee would like the system to be made easier to navigate but we recognise that the Scottish Government only has responsibility for certain parts of it.*

We recognise that rural and island communities can face additional and intersecting barriers when it comes to accessing social security, including limited digital connectivity, higher travel costs, and reduced access to local advice or support

services. That is why Social Security Scotland's approach remains 'digital when appropriate,' not digital by default. This ensures that people in rural communities can access support offline through paper forms, telephone as well as face-to-face local delivery teams, ensuring equitable support for those who prefer non-digital routes to access their entitlements.

We also continue to take steps to simplify the application journey, including by providing:

- online applications for all devolved benefits (first in the UK for disability benefits);
- a range of formats or routes through which people can apply. For example, online, over the phone, by post, or in-person (with the support of Social Security Scotland's Local Delivery service and, for disabled people who need additional support, the Social Security Independent Advocacy Service).
- webchat and secure digital evidence upload;
- updated notifications by text/email where preferred; and
- the ability to filter questions online as people complete their application so people only see what's relevant to them.

While responsibility for much of the wider social security system remains reserved to the UK Government, the Scottish Government is using every lever available within devolved competence to tackle barriers to benefit take-up and make it easier for people to access their entitlements.

Our Benefit Take-Up Strategy is specifically designed to tackle these barriers, including stigma, lack of awareness, and difficulties navigating complex systems. Through this Strategy, and the actions set out in it, we are working to maximise take-up for everyone who is eligible, including in rural communities, ensuring that people receive the financial support they are entitled to regardless of where they live. Lessons learned from implementation of the current Strategy and the Seldom Heard Action Plan are informing the development of the next Strategy, due by October 2026.

### **Committee report paragraph 78**

*The Committee welcomes the continued Scottish Government funding for independent advocacy services to help people most in need to navigate the system. However, we note the comments of stakeholders which suggest that such services are at risk when provided locally due to budget cuts and invite the Scottish Government to respond to these concerns.*

The delivery of the Social Security Independent Advocacy Service is a statutory requirement under the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, which places a legal duty on Scottish Ministers to ensure that disabled people who need support to engage effectively with the Scottish social security system can access free, independent advocacy across Scotland.

To effectively fulfil this duty, the Scottish Government funds the service through a procured national delivery model. When the original tender was developed in 2021, a range of delivery options were carefully considered. A national delivery model was selected as it was considered to offer the greatest consistency of provision and

equity of access for disabled people across Scotland, regardless of where they live. This approach will continue to mitigate the risks that stakeholders have highlighted to the Committee.

Since its launch in January 2022, the service has supported over 15,000 disabled people. The service is now delivered by Advice Direct Scotland (ADS), through their dedicated advocacy.scot platform. In line with contractual requirements, the new provider must deliver a fully national service, ensuring consistent access for disabled people across urban, rural and remote communities.

## 2.6 Social Rights – Housing

### **Committee report paragraph 96**

*The Committee is conscious that the national housing emergency has been a key priority for the Parliament throughout the current session and that other committees such as the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee have considered the subject in detail. Whilst we have been unable to consider challenges relating to the availability and affordability of housing in rural areas to the same extent in the time available for this inquiry, it is clear that this remains a significant challenge which impacts on several aspects of the sustainability of rural communities and requires urgent action.*

In September 2025, the Scottish Government announced an ambitious, enhanced and accelerated Housing Emergency Action Plan to tackle the housing emergency, including measures to increase the supply of affordable homes in Scotland's rural and island communities. Building on the significant progress made to date (the delivery of more than 12,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities between April 2016 and March 2024), the plan reflects our determination to go further and faster in our commitment to tackling the housing emergency. To enable this, the Scottish National Investment Bank will also accelerate its housing activity by expanding its pipeline through strategic partnerships, build-to-rent initiatives and lending to SME housebuilders, while exploring new ways to blend commercial investment with public subsidy to unlock additional rural and urban homes across tenures.

Alongside this, the Scottish Government is working with public bodies, landowners and the Bank to unlock land, strengthen delivery capacity and develop a long-term pipeline of investment opportunities tailored to rural and island needs. To further support rural delivery, Scottish Ministers have issued a letter to planning authorities highlighting the important role of SME housebuilders in rural and brownfield development and stressing the need for proportionality within the planning system to help enable and accelerate housing delivery in these communities.

In addition to the ongoing response to the Housing Emergency, the Scottish Government announced in January our intention to establish a new national housing agency with a focus on simplicity, scale and speed to enable the delivery of housing of all types, helping to meet housing need across Scotland, including in rural and island areas. The executive agency will be called 'More Homes Scotland' and is expected to start operating from 2027-28 and be fully functional in 2028-29, subject

to the outcome of the Scottish Parliament election. A process to co-design the functions and operating model of the new agency will be led by the next governments Housing portfolio holder in partnership with local authorities and the Scottish National Investment Bank over the coming months.

### **Committee report paragraph 97**

*We invite the Scottish Government to provide an update on its current position and any next steps in respect of the following suggestions and challenges as raised by stakeholders:*

- *The need for investment in small-scale builders, infrastructure and training to help make construction in rural communities more viable;*
- *What more can be done to encourage housing to be constructed in communities which are most in need and to ensure adequate transport and infrastructure links where necessary;*
- *The need to enable greater flexibility in the planning system;*
- *The need to encourage large landowners to make land available for house construction where alternative options are limited or do not exist;*
- *The impact of large numbers of short-term lets and people from elsewhere buying up properties in rural communities, particularly on Scotland's islands.*

### Support for rural builders

The Housing Emergency Action Plan includes a number of measures to support rural builders and to increase the supply of affordable homes in Scotland's rural and island communities. This includes the aforementioned steps under 2.6 in relation to the Scottish National Investment Bank and the letter from Scottish Ministers to planning authorities about SME builders.

### Encouraging housing development in rural Scotland

We recognise that good quality, affordable housing is essential to help attract and retain people in Scotland's rural and island communities. The Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, published in October 2023, was developed through strong engagement with our rural and island stakeholders. The Plan encourages housing development in rural and island communities through four key action areas: enabling the delivery of more high-quality affordable homes, making best use of existing homes and support for home ownership, supporting community-led development, and housing and local economies.

We are building on the delivery of more than 12,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities between April 2016 and March 2024, and we remain focused on delivering 110,000 affordable homes across Scotland by 2032, with at least 10% in our rural and island communities. Currently around 15-20% of homes delivered through our Affordable Housing Supply Programme are in rural and island communities. Demand-led funds, such as the £37 million Rural and Island Housing Fund, which was recently extended to 2028, and the £25 million Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers Fund, are a key and additional part of our approach working

with local authorities, as the strategic housing authorities to address specific rural housing issues where they arise.

The new National Islands Plan features a number of commitments aimed at increasing the delivery of affordable housing for island communities as well as a better use of the existing housing stock, for instance by reducing the number of empty homes.

### Planning system

A key principle of National Planning Framework 4, adopted by the Scottish Ministers in 2023, is rural revitalisation. National planning policy contained in NPF4 strengthened rural policy, giving explicit and positive support for the delivery of more high quality, affordable and sustainable rural homes. In support of accelerating investment in delivery, the Housing Emergency Action Plan commits us to four new planning actions.

In addition to the aforementioned letter from Scottish Ministers to planning authorities about SME builders, we are currently consulting on four options to accelerate build-out of housing sites across Scotland. One of the options proposes introducing means of reducing procedural time and costs for SME housebuilders.

### Land Reform (Scotland ) Act 2025

New duties on landowners who own more than 1000 hectares of land will be introduced through regulations under the recent Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025. Specifically, landowners will need to engage with their local communities to produce a publicly available 'land management plan' for their land, and these plans will need to demonstrate how the landowner has taken into account the engagement carried out. Landowners will also have a duty to refer to Local Place Plans, where they exist, so that plans reflect local priorities. These plans will help to improve engagement between landowners and local communities where there is housing need, and provide better visibility of actions taken in response. The 2025 Act also includes duties on landowners to consider community requests to lease land.

Additionally, the 2025 Act will give Ministers 'lotting' powers to split up large landholdings when being sold, if it is shown that this will support community sustainability – for example, by making more land available for housing. The Act will also ensure that communities can receive advance notification of impending sales or transfers of land by large landowners, giving them a better chance to make a right to buy application and own land that can benefit the wider community.

Implementation of these measures in the 2025 Act require consultation and secondary legislation in the next Parliamentary term which is subject to the decisions of the incoming government.

### Short-term lets and second homes

We are committed to supporting sustainable, resilient and thriving communities across Scotland, ensuring that local people can continue to live, work and build their

futures in the places they call home. While short term lets and second homes benefit owners and hosts, we recognise that high concentrations may impact communities. This is why we have taken a series of targeted actions to help manage these impacts.

This includes the Additional Dwelling Supplement being increased to 8% of the total purchase price on additional properties of £40,000 or more, which is intended to support first-time buyers and home-movers by helping them compete with buy-to-let investors or those buying second homes. Through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 we have strengthened council tax powers by removing the previous statutory cap on council tax premiums and establishing a national default premium of 100% for both categories. This ensures a consistent baseline across Scotland and gives councils clearer tools to manage local housing pressures. Councils now have full discretion to apply the 100% premium, increase it, reduce it, apply no premium, or offer a discount, depending on local needs. These enhanced powers enable local authorities to make better use of existing housing stock, strike the right balance between supporting communities and managing second homes, and respond proportionately where high concentrations of such properties affect the availability of homes for local people.

Subject to meeting required criteria, councils can designate areas as short term let control areas to help manage high concentrations of short-term lets, and to ensure that homes are used to best effect according to local need. Control areas are currently in place in Edinburgh and the Badenoch & Strathspey area of Highland. Highland Council has also agreed to undertake further consultations on additional potential control areas.

National statistics published in December 2025 show a continued fall in the number of second homes across Scotland. We are reviewing whether this trend is mirrored across island and rural authorities, and early indications suggest similar patterns in several areas. Data published in December 2024 and December 2025 indicate that most of the councils covering island and rural areas have seen a reduction in second-home numbers over the year.

We believe that, as the statutory housing provider, local authorities are best placed to understand local housing needs and we believe that the powers we have given them enable them to make best use of existing housing.

## 2.7 Social Rights – Health and Healthcare Access

### **Committee report paragraph 116**

*The Committee recognises that it is unrealistic to expect all rural communities, particularly those in more isolated areas, to have immediate access to the full range of health services on their doorsteps. However, the Committee is concerned that some essential health services such as those relating to maternity appear to be being further centralised in regions such as the Highlands. This may lead to situations where expectant mothers are being compelled to undergo procedures which may not be clinically necessary in order to “choose” where and when to give birth rather than having the choice of a natural birth closer to home. We are also concerned that mothers (and their babies) who opt not to travel to major population centres to access maternity services may be placed at greater risk in the event of complications arising in midwife-led maternity units such as in Caithness, and would urge the Scottish Government to provide innovative solutions whereby consultants can be called upon when this happens, rather than moving a woman in labour to another hospital. The Committee calls for urgent action to address this. Moreover, the Committee queries whether the Scottish Government’s expectation that such services “are delivered as close to home as possible” is being realised in practice although we recognise that decisions on the most appropriate place to treat patients should always be based on clinical evidence.*

The Scottish Government recognises the challenges raised regarding maternity services in rural and island areas, and we are working closely with NHS Boards, clinicians and community partners to ensure services remain safe, person-centred and as close to home as possible. Through *The Best Start*<sup>2</sup>, we have already set out a national model of maternity and neonatal care that keeps mothers and babies together wherever possible, places parents at the centre of care, and ensures the smallest and sickest babies receive the specialist support they need to achieve the best outcomes.

We are clear that all decisions about pregnancy care, including place of birth, should be made by women in discussion with their midwife and obstetrician, based on individual needs and circumstances. We expect all NHS Boards to provide maternity services as close to home as practicable, while balancing the paramount need to ensure the safety of mother and baby. Where specialist maternity or neonatal care cannot safely be delivered locally, women and babies may need to travel, and Boards are expected to facilitate seamless access to this care. We also recognise that it will not always be possible to transfer mothers before they give birth; in such cases, our specialist neonatal transfer service, ScotSTAR, continues to provide safe transfer for babies in ambulances equipped specifically for neonatal care. The Scottish Perinatal network has developed and published guidance for all Boards across Scotland to support identification and transfer of mothers in suspected extreme preterm labour.

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<sup>2</sup> [The Best Start: A Five-Year Forward Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Care in Scotland](#)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care announced the new Scottish Ministerial Maternity and Neonatal Taskforce in October 2025. The Taskforce's role is to provide strategic level oversight of the safety, quality, and improvement of early pregnancy, maternity and neonatal services across Scotland. The Cabinet Secretary has asked the Taskforce to look at rural maternity services as one of its first areas of focus.

### **Committee report paragraph 117**

*In respect of local GP services, the Committee notes that the situation appears to vary, with some rural stakeholders reporting that they have better access to GPs than may be the case in urban areas. Whilst it appears that the number of GP practices in rural communities is reducing, the Committee notes comments from stakeholders that this provides an opportunity for innovation. The Committee invites the Scottish Government to confirm what actions it is taking to encourage greater innovation in the delivery of frontline GP services in rural communities.*

The Scottish Government recognises the challenges to delivery of frontline GP services in rural communities, one of which is recruitment and retention. That is why we have taken forward a range of measures to address this issue, including financial incentives such as the £10,000 'Golden Hello' scheme to encourage GPs to take up rural posts, as well as professional development opportunities through the NES Rural Fellowship, which operates across six Health Board areas and enables newly qualified GPs to develop the broad generalist skills required for rural and island practice. We also fund 70 annual places on Scotland's first graduate-entry medical programme, ScotGEM, a four-year course designed to meet the current and future needs of the NHS with a strong focus on rural medicine and healthcare improvement.

We are innovating in health delivery through the Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework (SRF)<sup>3</sup>, which uses population-based planning to redesign services around real community needs. The framework explicitly supports differentiated approaches by geography, recognising that access, time to care, workforce sustainability, clinical volume and service resilience vary significantly across populations. For rural, remote and island contexts, the SRF supports clear tiered models of care that define what should be delivered locally, regionally or nationally, promotes greater use of networks, outreach, retrieval and digital models, and prioritises avoiding unsafe replication of low-volume services while protecting equity of access.

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<sup>3</sup> [The Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework](#)

### **Committee report paragraph 118**

*In respect of the need for a preventive approach to reduce the risk of costly acute interventions at a later date, the Committee is mindful that the Parliament and its committees have repeatedly called for such a decisive shift, dating back at least as far as the publication of the Christie Commission's report on the delivery of essential services in 2011. The Committee recognises the challenges in moving towards such an approach, not least in terms of its costs and the need for disinvestment in other services, but is clear that such a shift would result in longer-term savings thereby freeing up resource for much needed investment in other priorities. We are disappointed that the pace of change has been slow and recommend that greater emphasis is placed on the urgent need for prevention.*

The SRF has a clear focus on primary care and community health and commits us to increasing access to health and social care services and treatments in the community, with the most complex and acute areas of care and treatment being retained in hospitals. We will publish a Primary Care and Community Health Route Map, later this year, within the first year of the SRF, which will set out how we will strengthen core 'front-door' health services and support wider community-based health improvement. It will play a key role in supporting a shift towards prevention and care delivered in community settings, complementing wider action under the Population Health Framework and reinforcing prevention as a central priority for health and social care services.

### **Committee report paragraph 119**

*In respect of long waiting times for procedures such as cataract operations or hip and knee replacements, the Committee agrees that it is not acceptable for patients in rural communities to have to wait longer than their urban counterparts and that any such variances should be addressed as a matter of urgency. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to provide statistical data on any disparities on waiting times between urban and rural health boards and to outline the immediate and longer-term actions it is taking to address them where necessary.*

The Scottish Government is taking forward a number of initiatives to embed regional and national working to ensure that patients can access treatment more quickly. From 2026-27, Health Boards will take forward a new collaborative subnational planning approach - Scotland East and Scotland West - through which they will cooperate with each other to optimise capacity to ensure equitable access to services based on population need, under a Once for Scotland model. This is in line with key aspects of the Health and Social Care Service Renewal Framework (2025–2035), the Population Health Framework, as well as wider ambitions related to public sector reform.

This new approach strengthens accountability for population-based planning, improves service equity and supports the transformation of Scotland's health and care system. It recognises that while Health Boards remain legally responsible and accountable for their statutory functions, the scale and complexity of modern health services means that collaboration on a sub-national basis between health boards in different geographies is essential to achieve optimum outcomes.

In addition, the Scottish Government commissioned National Centre for Sustainable Delivery (CfSD) continues to play a central role in working with Health Boards to ensure that they are able to continually identify new ways to increase capacity and to respond to demand through service innovation and redesign. As well as creating additional capacity, the aim is to develop new pathways of care that are more efficient and to enhance delivery of services in community settings, including rural and island communities which are likely to have distinctive needs. Crucially, this also supports reductions in the variation and waiting times for planned care by adopting minimum standards to deliver higher volume activity.

Finally, our National Treatment Centre (NTC) programme provides significant additional and protected capacity for orthopaedic, ophthalmic and diagnostic procedures for patients across Scotland. NTC capacity is a national resource, and annual allocations are based on the latest waiting times information available to the Scottish Government at the time of decision. This approach ensures the NTCs are targeting the longest waiting patients who meet the clinical criteria for NTCs and allocations of activity are determined on this basis.

The tables below show the 90th percentile for completed and ongoing waits for New Outpatient and Inpatient/day-case procedures broken down by NHS Board.

**Note:** The 90th percentile is used to indicate that nine out of ten patients experienced a wait less than or equal to the number of days shown. The 90th Percentile ongoing waits and 90th Percentile completed waits can be quite different from each other due to patients who require urgent treatment being seen within shorter time periods. It is important to look at both percentages together.

**Data source:** [Stage of treatment waiting times - Inpatients, day cases and new outpatients 24 February 2026 - NHS waiting times - stage of treatment - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#)

**Table 1. New Outpatient 90th Percentile Ongoing Waits in days – month ending January 2026**

NHS Board of Treatment	All Specialties	Ophthalmology	Orthopaedics
NHS Scotland	305	313	304
NHS Ayrshire & Arran	320	324	151
NHS Borders	271	207	275
NHS Dumfries & Galloway	281	256	282
NHS Fife	248	246.8	214
NHS Forth Valley	156	129	106.4
NHS Golden Jubilee	404	383	464.9
NHS Grampian	417	292	365.6
NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde	261	238	295
NHS Highland	341	447.8	165.3
NHS Lanarkshire	291	297	312
NHS Lothian	425	424.5	420

NHS Orkney	233	76.6	275.1
NHS Shetland	253.7	334	131
NHS Tayside	326	156	219
NHS Western Isles	156.3	176	101.4

**Table 2. New Outpatient 90th Percentile Completed Waits in days – month ending January 2026**

NHS Board of Treatment	All Specialties	Ophthalmology	Orthopaedics
NHS Scotland	352	362	343
NHS Ayrshire & Arran	463	387.3	181
NHS Borders	382	311	404.4
NHS Dumfries & Galloway	318.7	180.6	338.8
NHS Fife	270	251	248
NHS Forth Valley	163	148	78
NHS Golden Jubilee	415.6	409	464.5
NHS Grampian	406	344	476
NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde	327	300	339
NHS Highland	313	186	247.3
NHS Lanarkshire	390	386.1	448
NHS Lothian	474	555	291.8
NHS Orkney	245.1	94.5	341.7
NHS Shetland	165	286.8	
NHS Tayside	448	176.2	237
NHS Western Isles	162.4		72.6

**Table 3. Inpatient/Daycase 90th Percentile Ongoing Waits in days – month ending January 2026**

NHS Board of Treatment	All Specialties	Ophthalmology	Orthopaedics
NHS Scotland	439	333	431
NHS Ayrshire & Arran	397	292.6	439
NHS Borders	299	124.6	298
NHS Dumfries & Galloway	354	329	501
NHS Fife	319	360.1	354.8
NHS Forth Valley	269	220	269
NHS Golden Jubilee	388	54	560
NHS Grampian	739	544	733
NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde	480	298	381
NHS Highland	314	414.5	324
NHS Lanarkshire	348	256.6	324
NHS Lothian	382	157	415
NHS Orkney	201	220	
NHS Shetland	333	369.4	
NHS Tayside	494.1	461.5	473
NHS Western Isles	148.7	91.4	178

**Table 4. Inpatient/Daycase 90th Percentile Completed Waits in days – month ending January 2026**

<b>NHS Board of Treatment</b>	<b>All Specialties</b>	<b>Ophthalmology</b>	<b>Orthopaedics</b>
NHS Scotland	438	397	512
NHS Ayrshire & Arran	454	218.6	623.8
NHS Borders	298.5	129.4	394.6
NHS Dumfries & Galloway	378	384	580.2
NHS Fife	431	453.1	448
NHS Forth Valley	400.5	252	395.9
NHS Golden Jubilee	126	68	360.4
NHS Grampian	410.8	342.3	711
NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde	576.9	333	571.1
NHS Highland	223	119	300.6
NHS Lanarkshire	438	352.7	484.1
NHS Lothian	424	168	522
NHS Orkney	247.6	351.8	
NHS Shetland	193.4		
NHS Tayside	463.8	474	692
NHS Western Isles	159	166	98.8

## **2.8 Access to Justice**

### **Committee report paragraph 131**

*The Committee strongly values the services provided by third sector organisations in delivering advice and assistance to rural residents. This is particularly important for services supporting people when they are most vulnerable, including victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse.*

We recognise that women living in small rural or island communities can face distinct challenges related to all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG), where abuse may be more hidden and victim-survivors can experience greater isolation than those in urban areas. Through our Delivering Equally Safe Fund, we provide vital specialist violence against women support services in every local authority in Scotland, ensuring that rural and island communities are fully included. Of the £21.6 million allocated in 2025–26, over £5.4 million is dedicated specifically to projects supporting women and girls in our most rural and island areas, demonstrating our continued commitment to reaching those who may be most isolated and least visible.

### **Committee report paragraph 132**

*The Committee recognises the essential contribution that such services make, not just through advice and counselling, but also in collating the data needed to inform policy decisions. The Committee is clear that third sector organisations cannot be expected to provide these essential services without stable, long-term and sufficient funding, particularly given the need to build trust with service users. We invite the Scottish Government to respond to the concerns raised by stakeholders in this context and strongly recommend that further investment is made available to support the continued provision of such services on a sustainable basis going forward.*

We appreciate the challenging circumstances many organisations are currently operating within and greatly value the third sector’s strategic role in transforming and delivering person-centred services. We also recognise that the sector needs clarity and stability to strengthen its resilience and grow its capacity, which is why we have announced a two-year funding agreement for the Delivering Equally Safe Fund covering 2026 to 2028. This fund supports organisations across Scotland to deliver direct services for victims and survivors of gender-based violence and to carry out vital prevention work. Our multi-year investment, alongside a 5 percent uplift, brings total funding for the Delivering Equally Safe Fund to almost £46 million over 2026 to 2028, nearly £23 million per year, providing funded organisations with the stability and certainty they need to plan ahead, retain specialist staff and sustain the vital services they deliver.

### **Committee report paragraph 133**

*The Committee also invites the Scottish Government to respond to conflicting concerns relating to the collation of localised data. The SHRC, for example, suggested that such data was “kept atomised” meaning national trends may not be identified. Conversely, Scottish Rural Action told us that data from rural areas is often absorbed into national data meaning it frequently “gets lost.”*

Strong and reliable evidence is key to delivering successful rural proofing. In December 2025 we published an updated Rural Scotland Data Dashboard, compiling evidence on rural Scotland, drawn from a range of sources. The Dashboard establishes our baseline picture of rural Scotland across a variety of different sectors, helping us understand and shape policy around the overall conditions in rural Scotland.

We have also conducted the Scottish Islands Surveys in 2020 and 2023 to gather data on the socio-economic circumstances of islanders and their perceptions of island life. Alongside other data sources, survey findings have shaped regular updates to the Scottish Islands Data Dashboard – a public-facing tool that tracks key trends across Scotland’s islands and supports evidence-based decision-making, including for the purposes of statutory Island Communities Impact Assessments. Through the new National Islands Plan, we have committed to carrying out a further iteration of the Survey in 2026-27 and to supporting community-led approaches to gathering island-level data.

In 2023, we published the Scottish Island Regions geography report, grouping Scotland's islands into nine regions. This framework provides a consistent basis for structuring datasets and collecting new data. It also enables more meaningful comparisons between island groups and with the rest of Scotland.

We continue to work across policy areas to refine the indicators and sources reflected in the Dashboards and to support data disaggregation in order to be able to identify where there are specific differences in rural and islands experience.

#### **Committee report paragraph 134**

*In respect of civil legal aid, the Committee has considered this topic in detail through its inquiry on civil legal assistance. It notes the steps the Scottish Government has taken to widen access to legal aid more broadly, including through recent secondary legislation, but notes that these instruments did not give effect to the recommendations contained in the Committee's recent report on civil legal assistance. We look forward to receiving an update on proposed next steps following an analysis of responses to the Scottish Government's discussion paper.*

The Scottish Government chose to take forward the measures which we believe offer the greatest overall impact whilst remaining practical to deliver within current parliamentary timelines. The regulations laid earlier this year were prioritised from a wider set of options provided by the Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB), and were selected to strike the right balance across different types of legal aid while ensuring that changes could be implemented effectively and within the available timeframe. Those regulations, which were passed by Parliament on 11 February 2026, form only part of the ongoing programme of legal aid reform, and demonstrated our immediate priority to simplify and improve the system in areas where changes could be delivered quickly and effectively.

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety wrote to the Committee on 23 February 2026 setting out the actions the Scottish Government has delivered since publication of the Legal Aid Reform Discussion Paper, the further measures delivered beyond the original commitments, and the work planned for the next parliamentary session.

#### **Committee report paragraph 135**

*However, the Committee is clear that it is not acceptable for residents of rural areas to face such limited options in accessing advice and assistance as is the case in the Highlands. Our recent Report on our inquiry into Civil Legal Assistance in Scotland found that "there is an urgent need for action to improve the delivery of the civil legal assistance and in turn improve access to justice." We therefore disagree with the Minister's suggestion that the legal aid system is "generally effective in delivering help to those who need it," particularly those living in remote and rural communities and reiterate our conclusions around the urgent need for reform as set out in our report.*

Publicly funded legal assistance on matters of Scots law is available in principle to all who meet the eligibility criteria. The Legal Aid Fund is demand-led and directly linked to application numbers, and all eligible costs are met by the Scottish Government.

Legal aid helps thousands of people annually, but the system is not designed to guarantee universal access to a solicitor.

It is important to remember that neither the Scottish Government nor the Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB) can compel private solicitors to undertake legal aid work. The Scottish Government has continued its investment in the Legal Aid system, and SLAB figures show that there were 170,000 grants of legal assistance made in the last 12 months and the total cost on the Fund budget in 2024-25 year was £169 million. In cash terms, this is the highest ever annual expenditure on legal aid and marks a 12% increase on the previous year, the highest since 2016-17 in real terms.

There are several ways in which access to solicitors can be facilitated remotely, and funding is available to allow solicitors to travel to rural and remote parts of the country to carry out work, meaning that individuals do not have to rely on local provision alone when seeking publicly funded legal assistance. Additionally, SLAB employed solicitors can provide advice and assistance to people with particular types of civil legal problems across Highlands and Islands, Argyll and Bute, Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, and Edinburgh and the Lothians through the network of Civil Legal Assistance Offices.

Last year, SLAB undertook a comprehensive analysis to assess legal aid activity at both geographic and subject-matter levels, and their findings were published in May. The [Civil Legal Aid: Geographic Trends Analysis](#) was undertaken to assist with SLAB's function of monitoring the availability and accessibility of legal services. This analysis highlights that previous reports from the Law Society of Scotland have focused on the location of civil legal aid solicitors' firms and the location of criminal legal aid practitioners, rather than the location of applicants.

The above notwithstanding, the Scottish Government agrees with the Committee's view that long-term structural reform of the civil legal assistance system is needed which is why we are already actively progressing a programme of work that lays the foundation for future reform and takes meaningful steps in the interim.

### **3. Committee Conclusions**

Paragraphs 136–143 of the Committee's report makes some broad observations regarding the inequalities and challenges faced by Scotland's rural and island communities. The report also highlights several issues, such as health and transport, which have been addressed across preceding sections of this response.

In this section, the Scottish Government's response therefore focuses on overarching actions and approaches, along with how we engage with rural communities. Depopulation has not been specifically covered above so that issue is also addressed here.

**Committee report paragraph 136**

*This inquiry has highlighted the significant and often deep-rooted inequalities experienced by people living in rural and island communities across Scotland. Whilst rural areas contribute enormously to Scotland's social, cultural and economic life, it is clear that many residents do not currently enjoy the same level of access to services, infrastructure and opportunities that are more readily available elsewhere. The evidence received consistently pointed to a pattern of structural disadvantage spanning transport, digital connectivity, social security, employment, health, housing and access to justice, which undermines the full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights.*

**Committee report paragraph 137**

*Stakeholders emphasised that rural communities often face persistent systemic challenges, some of which stem from national policy frameworks that do not fully account for rural realities. The "rural premium" provides a striking example of this disparity. Without targeted action, pressures will continue to fall most heavily on those already at risk of poverty or exclusion.*

**Committee report paragraph 138**

*It is also clear that depopulation poses a significant threat to the sustainability of rural communities on multiple levels. For example, it can lead to closures of schools, medical facilities and other essential services where local demographics no longer provide sufficient demand for them. This in turn makes them less viable as a place to raise families thus contributing to a "vicious circle" of further depopulation.*

**Committee report paragraph 139**

*The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's acknowledgement of these issues and its commitment to improving rights realisation in rural areas. Initiatives such as the Fairer Funding pilot, investment in digital infrastructure, and targeted housing and employability schemes are welcome. However, the discrepancy between policy ambition and lived experience remains. Many rural residents continue to face barriers to essential services, including healthcare, childcare, specialist support, legal advice and public transport. The Committee is clear that progress to date has not sufficiently translated into meaningful and measurable improvements "on the ground."*

**Committee report paragraph 140**

*Throughout the inquiry, stakeholders stressed the importance of genuine partnership working, early and sustained engagement, and long-term investment in community-led organisations. These groups are often best placed to understand local need and design effective solutions, yet their work can be constrained by short-term or precarious funding. The Committee strongly believes that a shift toward multiyear, secure funding models is essential to unlocking the potential of these organisations and the communities they serve.*

**Committee report paragraph 141**

*Rural housing shortages continue to undermine workforce recruitment, drive depopulation, and restrict the ability of younger generations to remain in their communities. Similarly, the increasing centralisation of healthcare services, long travel distances, and gaps in emergency and maternity provision mean that rural residents can face barriers in accessing timely and appropriate care.*

**Committee report paragraph 142**

*Overall, the Committee considers that a more coherent, ambitious and flexible approach is needed to recognise the distinct needs of different rural and island areas, embed a rural and island lens across all stages of policymaking, and prioritise the realisation of human rights for all. We would expect a future Scottish Human Rights Bill to contribute to the realisation of this.*

**Committee report paragraph 143**

*Rural communities deserve equitable access to services, opportunities and rights. Delivering this is not only a matter of fairness, but essential to the wellbeing, sustainability and long-term prosperity of rural Scotland.*

### Overarching actions and approaches

We recognise that Scotland's unique geography creates challenges in delivering equitable access. The actions outlined above, such as our Rural Assessment Toolkit, demonstrate that the Scottish Government is taking decisive steps to address these barriers, as noted across this response. By strengthening approaches that promote fairness, sustainability and long-term prosperity, we are working to ensure that rural and island communities receive the support they need to thrive

### Depopulation

The Scottish Government recognises the challenge of depopulation and is committed to addressing it in affected communities. That is why we are currently providing £427,500 of funding across seven local authorities in depopulating parts of Scotland to trial innovative measures across areas such as housing, skills and childcare to support population sustainability in line with local priorities.

We established a Ministerial Population Taskforce in 2019, which met quarterly to discuss and agree action across portfolios, including broader delivery of our 2021 Population Strategy and 2024 Addressing Depopulation Action Plan. We also worked with an independent Migration and Population Expert Advisory Group to ensure that all of our interventions are underpinned by evidence.

Migration is also vital for supporting sustainable communities, economies and public services in Scotland. This is why we have launched a displaced adult social care pilot with £500,000 of Scottish Government funding to support sustainability within this key sector, including in parts of rural Scotland with an ageing population. We also continue to call on the UK Government to partner with us to deliver a Rural Visa

Pilot, recognising the positive impact that migration can have to address depopulation in rural and island Scotland, alongside labour shortages in key sectors.

### Working with rural communities

The Scottish Government co-creation and consultative approach to policy development aims to effectively engage those affected by policy and programmes to ensure they achieve the best outcomes. Many of the examples of tailored support described above are evidence of the benefits of this approach.

Where policy areas do not already have channels for that engagement, the Scottish Government's Rural Stakeholder Group, Scottish Rural Network and engagement with Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Islands Federation have provided insight, expertise, and access.

The statutory Islands Community Impact Assessment and introduction of the Rural Assessment Toolkit, backed by good and improving data, provide a structured approach for engagement and consideration of the potential impacts of specific policy, strategies and programmes.

## **4. Conclusion**

The Scottish Government is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Committee's report following its inquiry into human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland.

We note the challenges identified by the Committee through its inquiry are broad and cross-cutting, and touch on the work of all Scottish Government portfolios as well as the responsibilities of wider public bodies. This response has therefore sought to outline as far as possible the work the Scottish Government is doing in relation to the Committee's specific asks and recommendations.

The Scottish Government is committed to working with stakeholders and our rural and island communities to address the issues that have been raised in the Committee's inquiry, ensuring that progress across equality and human rights realisation is sustained into the next parliamentary session.