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Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Annual report of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee 2025-26



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Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, with the exception of matters relating to land reform, natural resources and peatland, Scottish Land Commission, Crown Estate Scotland, and Royal Botanic Garden.



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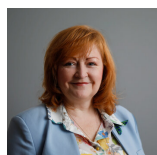
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Introduction

1. This report outlines the work of the [Rural Affairs and Islands Committee](#) during the parliamentary year from 13 May 2025 to 8 April 2026, after which the Scottish Parliament will be dissolved ahead of the election on 7 May 2026.
2. The Committee's remit is to consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, with the exception of matters relating to land reform, natural resources and peatland, Scottish Land Commission, Crown Estate Scotland, and Royal Botanic Garden.

Infographic showing key statistics of the Committee's work for 2025-26.



32

Committee meetings



Bills scrutinised



Reports published



SSIs considered

Membership changes

3. The following changes to the Committee's membership occurred during this parliamentary year—

Members:

- Elena Whitham resigned from the Committee and was replaced by Alasdair Allan (19 June to date).
- Mark Ruskell resigned from the Committee and was replaced by Ariane Burgess (2 September to date).

Substitute members:

- Brian Whittle was replaced by Jamie Halcro Johnston (26 June 2025 to date)
- Daniel Johnson was replaced by Foysol Choudhury (2 September 2025 to date)
- Ariane Burgess was replaced by Mark Ruskell (2 September 2025 to date)

Meetings

4. The Committee met 32 times during the reporting period. Of these meetings, four were held entirely in private, 23 meetings included at least one item taken in private and five meetings were held entirely in public. The reasons for taking business in private were to consider—
- the Committee's work programme
 - draft reports
 - evidence gathered through calls for views and
 - the evidence heard during committee meetings

Legislation

5. This section covers the Committee's scrutiny of primary legislation and subordinate legislation.

Dog Theft (Scotland) Bill

6. The [Dog Theft \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced by Maurice Golden MSP on 17 February 2025 and referred to the Committee for consideration at Stage 1.
7. The purpose of the Bill is to make dog theft a statutory offence. The Bill also includes other provisions relating to dog theft and the proposed offence.
8. Following the introduction of the Bill, the Committee held a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders on 26 March 2025 and an evidence session with the Minister for Victims and Community Safety on 23 April 2025. The Committee then took concluding evidence from the member in charge of the Bill at its meeting on 21 May 2025.
9. The Committee published its [Stage 1 report](#) on 2 July 2025 and concluded its consideration of the Bill at Stage 2 at its meeting on 5 November 2025. Following the [stage 3 debate on 16 December 2025](#), the Bill passed by a vote of 119 for, 2 against, 0 abstained, 8 did not vote. The Bill became an Act on 10 February 2026.

Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill

10. The [Natural Environment \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced on 19 February 2025.
11. The Bill had four main parts, aimed at protecting and restoring Scotland's natural environment:
 - Part 1 gave the Scottish Government the power to set statutory biodiversity targets
 - Part 2 proposed changes to environmental impact assessment and habitat legislation; however, this section was removed at stage 2
 - Part 3 aimed to introduce measures to modernise the functions and aims of national parks and
 - Part 4 updated deer management legislation to tackle the growing environmental impacts of wild deer in Scotland.
12. Following the introduction of the Bill, the Committee ran a [call for views](#) between 14 March and 9 May 2025.
13. Committee undertook [a fact-finding visit to the Cairngorms National Park](#) on 11 and 12 May 2025, and held a [online engagement with deer practitioners](#) on 21 May 2025, as part of its engagement work on the Bill.

Committee members visit to the Cairngorms National Park



14. The Committee held 12 oral evidence sessions on the Bill from March to June before concluding evidence from the Scottish Government in three separate sessions: the then Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy on Parts 1 and 2, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands on Part 3, and the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity on Part 4.
15. The Committee published its [Stage 1 report](#) on 30 September 2025. The Committee concluded its consideration of the Bill at stage 2 at its meetings on 19 and 26 November, and 3 and 10 December 2025. Following the [stage 3 debate on 29 January 2026](#), the Bill passed by a vote of 90 for, 26 against, 0 abstained, 13 did not vote.

Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill

16. The [Greyhound Racing \(Offences\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was introduced by Mark Ruskell MSP on 23 April 2025.
17. The Bill aims to improve and protect the welfare of greyhounds in Scotland by making it an offence to race greyhounds on greyhound racetracks in Scotland.
18. Following the introduction of the Bill, the Committee ran a [call for views](#) between 29 August to 10 October 2025.
19. The Committee held an oral evidence session on the Bill with the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity on 5 November 2025 before concluding evidence from

the Member in charge of the Bill at the Committee's meeting on 12 November 2025.

20. The Committee published its [Stage 1 report](#) on 22 January 2026.
21. The Committee concluded its consideration of the Bill at stage 2 at its meetings on 18 February 2026. The Stage 3 proceedings will be held on 18 March 2026.

Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

22. The [Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill](#) was introduced on 2 June 2025.
23. The Bill was in two main parts. Part 1 dealt with crofting and aimed to make various changes to the law on crofting such as enforcement of crofters' duties, the powers of the Crofting Commission, common grazings, and the Crofting Register. Part 2 of the Bill merged the Scottish Land Court and the Land Tribunal for Scotland.
24. Following the introduction of the Bill, the Committee ran a [call for views](#) between 13 June to 5 September 2025.
25. As part of its engagement work on the Bill, the Committee undertook a [fact-finding visit to Isle of Skye](#) on 21 and 22 September 2025. The Committee also held an [online meeting with crofters from across Scotland](#) on 10 November 2025.

Committee members meeting with Hanno and Anna from West Coast Organics, Isle of Skye



Committee members meeting with crofters on the Isle of Skye



26. The Committee held 5 oral evidence sessions on the Bill before concluding evidence from the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity of Scotland at its meeting on 12 November 2025.
27. The Committee published its [Stage 1 report](#) on 19 December 2025. The Committee concluded its consideration of the Bill at stage 2 at its meetings on 4 and 11 February 2026. The stage 3 proceedings will be held on 18 March 2026.

Subordinate legislation

28. During this reporting period, the Committee considered 27 Scottish statutory instruments (SSIs) of which eight were considered under the affirmative procedure and 13 under the negative procedure. The remaining six were laid only and not subject to any parliamentary procedure.
29. In addition to the subordinate legislation outlined above, the Committee also considered 8 proposals for UK SIs under the statutory instrument protocol agreed with the Scottish Government.

Other areas of consideration

30. During this parliamentary year, the Committee also undertook work on various subjects within its remit, including:
- [Budget scrutiny for 2026 to 2027](#)
 - [Draft Climate Change Plan as it relates to agriculture and land use](#)
 - [Petition PE1490 Control of wild goose numbers](#)
 - [Petition PE1758: End greyhound racing in Scotland](#)
 - [Proposed national Good Food Nation Plan](#)
 - [Salmon farming in Scotland - 12 month follow-up](#)

Budget scrutiny 2026 to 2027

31. On 21 January 2025, the Committee took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands on the spending plans for the Rural Affairs and Islands portfolio budget for 2026 to 27.
32. A [parliamentary debate on the Budget 2026-27 took place on 21 January 2026](#), during which the Committee raised key concerns relating to the rural affairs portfolio.

Draft Climate Change Plan as it relates to agriculture and land use

33. On 6 November, the Scottish Government published its draft Climate Change Plan (CCP), outlining policies to cut carbon emissions between 2026 and 2040 and support Scotland's target of reaching net zero by 2045.
34. Scrutiny of the draft CCP was undertaken by a number of parliamentary committees with each committee focusing their attention on issues directly relevant to their remits. This joint effort was led and coordinated by the Net Zero, Energy and Transport (NZET) Committee.
35. The Committee looked at the agriculture and land use, land use change and forestry chapters.
36. The Committee held two oral evidence sessions before concluding evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands at its meeting on 28 January 2026.
37. The Committee published its [report](#) on 12 February 2026, which informed the NZET Committee's consideration of the draft CCP.

Petition PE1490 Control of wild goose numbers

38. [Petition PE1490 Control of wild goose numbers](#), submitted by Patrick Krause on behalf of Scottish Crofting Federation, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the problems created by increasing populations of wild geese in the crofting areas as a matter of priority; reassess its decision to stop funding existing goose management programmes, and assign additional resources to Crop Protection and Adaptive Management programmes to ensure this threat to the future of crofting is averted.
39. The Committee had previously agreed to wait for the National Goose Policy Framework delivery plan to be published before considering the petition further.
40. After hearing from NatureScot and Scottish Government officials on 11 March 2026 about the delivery plan and related issues, the Committee agreed to close the petition. The Committee concluded that the actions set out in NatureScot's delivery plan and National Goose Policy Framework would sufficiently address the problems created by increasing populations of wild geese in the crofting areas.

Petition PE1758: End greyhound racing in Scotland

41. [Petition PE1758: End greyhound racing in Scotland](#), submitted by Gill Docherty on behalf of Scotland Against Greyhound Exploitation, called on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to put an end to greyhound racing in Scotland.
42. Given the Committee's consideration of the Greyhound Racing (Offences) (Scotland) Bill, the Committee agreed to close the petition.

First national Good Food Nation Plan

43. Under the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022, the Scottish Government is required to produce a national Good Food Nation Plan which "sets out the Government's goals for food policy and how it intends to achieve them". The [proposed first national Good Food Nation Plan](#) was laid in the Scottish Parliament by the Scottish Government on 27 June 2025 for a 60-day period before it was finalised and published.
44. At its meeting on 3 September 2025, the Committee took evidence from a wide range of stakeholders on the proposed first national Good Food Nation Plan, focusing on its implications for rural affairs, agriculture and fisheries, as well as the process of preparing the plan.
45. The finalised [first national Good Food Nation Plan](#) was published on 17 December 2025; an accompanying statement which explained how parliamentary scrutiny shaped the final version was also published.
46. The Scottish Ministers need to have regard to the national Good Food Nation Plan when exercising a specified function or a function of a specified description. The

[Good Food Nation \(Specified Functions and Descriptions\) \(Scottish Ministers\) Regulations 2025](#), laid on 27 October 2025, set out the Scottish Government's proposals for the specified functions.

47. The Committee considered this instrument at its meeting on 3 December 2025. After taking evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, the Committee voted not to recommend that Parliament approve the regulations. As a result, the Scottish Government withdrew the instrument and intends to re-lay revised draft regulations in the next parliamentary session.

Salmon farming in Scotland – 12-month follow-up

48. In January 2025, the Committee published its report on [follow-up inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland](#), assessing progress on recommendations from the session 5 Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's 2018 report. The review focused on four themes:
 - fish health and welfare.
 - environmental impacts.
 - interactions between wild and farmed salmon.
 - farm consents and planning.
49. While the report recognised some changes since 2018, it concluded that progress on improving regulation and enforcement had been too slow. The Committee asked the Scottish Government to implement all outstanding recommendations urgently and set out a clear timetable and measures for delivery over the following 12 months.
50. In early 2026, the Committee considered the Scottish Government's progress against its report recommendations. It took evidence from industry representatives, regulators and Fisheries Management Scotland on 25 February 2026, before concluding evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands on 11 March 2026. The Committee wrote to the Scottish Government with its concluding views.

Community engagement

51. The Committee has sought, as far as possible, to engage with rural and island communities and with sector practitioners, including crofters, farmers, land managers and workers, and fishers, throughout the course of its scrutiny. As set out earlier in this report, the Committee held an online meeting with deer managers, and travelled to the Cairngorms National Park, to discuss the impact of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill and held an online meeting with crofters, and travelled to the Isle of Skye, to discuss the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill. Such engagement provides an important perspective, enabling members to consider more fully the direct impact of Scottish Government policy and legislation on groups and individuals.

