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SPICe Briefing

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External affairs: subject profile

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This subject profile sets out details of the Scottish Government's international policies. These include its international relations policies, including international development and its diaspora strategy and international footprint. It also sets out details of the Scottish Government's external affairs budget. Finally it looks at the scrutiny approach of the Scottish Parliament in this area during Session 6.



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Summary

Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act reserves international relations. However, provision is made for Scottish Ministers to "assist Ministers of the Crown in relation to any matter". As a result, throughout the history of devolution, successive Scottish Governments have ensured an international presence and pursued a form of international engagement. This approach dates back to the first Scottish administration which established an office in Brussels in 1999.

The Session 6 Scottish Government published a number of different international policies including a Global Affairs Framework, an international strategy and strategies with a focus on Ireland-Scotland relations, the Nordic Baltic region and the Arctic.

The strategies focus on the following overarching priorities:

- How the economy, trade and investment benefit from the Scottish Government's international policies;
- how Scotland cooperates with the international community on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Renewable Energy and
- reputation, influence and relationships

The Scottish Government also published a Scottish Connections Framework which set out the Scottish Government's approach to engaging with Scotland's diaspora. The Scottish Government also uses its nine international offices to pursue its international policies.

The Scottish Government has maintained an international development programme for over twenty years. It's focus continues to be on four partner countries: Malawi, Zambia, Rwanda and Pakistan (in relation to education).

The Scottish Parliament's Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee (CEEAC) undertook two enquiries related to the Scottish Government's international policy during Session 6. Firstly CEEAC undertook an [Inquiry into the Scottish Government's International Work](#) leading to the publication of its report on 6 April 2022. In October 2024, CEEAC published a report focused on the [Review of Outcomes and Indicators relating to the Scottish Government's International Work](#).

These inquiry reports led to the Scottish Government publishing an International Network Annual Report which supports the Parliament's ability to scrutinise the Scottish Government's external affairs policies.

International relations in the Scotland Act

[Schedule 5 Section 7 \(1\) of the Scotland Act 1998](#) reserves Foreign Affairs. Foreign affairs are defined as:

“ International relations, including relations with territories outside the United Kingdom, the European Union (and their institutions) and other international organisations, regulation of international trade, and international development assistance and cooperation are reserved matters.”

Legislation.gov.uk. , 1998¹

However, provision is made for Scottish Ministers to "assist Ministers of the Crown in relation to any matter" to which section 7(1) applies.

For example, [in a letter dated 23 May 2005](#), the Secretary of State for International Development confirmed that international development policies outlined by the Scottish Executive "will assist Ministers of the Crown under the terms of the Scotland Act. The Scotland Office have agreed this advice." ² In April 2021, the Scottish Government stated that it had continued to work with the UK Government on delivery of international development policy, giving examples of areas of discussion and cooperation, which, it stated "show the consistent and continuing approach of the Scottish Ministers (for the purposes of the Scotland Act) in assisting UK Government Ministers, with their agreement, on international development matters." ³

Successive Scottish Governments have sought to base the objective of their international focused policies on pursuing benefits for Scotland in areas of devolved competence, such as to boost international trade.

Throughout the history of devolution, successive Scottish Governments have ensured an international presence and pursued a form of international engagement. This approach dates back to the first Scottish administration which established an office in Brussels in 1999.

The Scottish Government's strategies

The Session 6 Scottish Government published a number different international policies including:

- [Scotland's Global Affairs Framework](#) (published in May 2022)
- [Scotland's International Strategy](#) (published in January 2024)
- [Taking a feminist approach to international relations](#) (published in November 2023)
- [Scottish Connections Framework](#) (published in April 2023)
- [Ireland Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework 2030](#) (published in November 2025)

Strategies published by previous Scottish Governments which appear to still be operational include:

- [Nordic Baltic policy statement](#) (updated in September 2017)
- [Arctic Connections: Scotland's Arctic policy framework](#) (published in September 2019)
- [Global Citizenship: Scotland's International Development Strategy](#) (published in December 2016)

The Global Affairs Framework

On 9 May 2022, the Scottish Government published its Global Affairs Framework. The framework set out:

“ the values and principles underpinning the Scottish Government’s international work and the basis on which the Scottish Government will prioritise its international activity.”

Scottish Government , 2022⁴

The framework focused on the following values and principles:

- good global citizenship
- maintaining the closest possible relationship with the European Union
- gender equality
- climate crisis and climate justice
- respect for human rights and the rule of law
- the role of our international networks
- Scotland’s culture.

Whilst the framework set out a number of ambitions, it did not set out any targets or indicate any ways by which success could be evaluated.

Detailed analysis of the Global Affairs Framework was provided in a [SPICe blog](#) shortly after the framework was published.

Scotland's International Strategy

Scotland's International Strategy was published in January 2024. It set out the Scottish Government's approach to international engagement and delivery to the end of the Session 6 parliamentary term. A key point highlighted in the strategy is that for the Scottish Government to achieve its domestic policy priorities it will be required to "act internationally".

The first section of the strategy sets out how the economy, trade and investment benefits from the Scottish Government's international policies by highlighting:

“ how the Scottish Government, in collaboration with its partner organisations and businesses in Scotland, will deliver its international trade and investment objectives, the key sectors, priorities and geographies of focus, and the vital role played by the Scottish International Network in delivering for Scotland.”

Scottish Government , 2024⁵

The next section of the strategy looks at how Scotland cooperates with the international community on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Renewable Energy:

“ Our international efforts will be key to furthering Scotland’s place in the world and attracting innovation, investment and partnerships that bring benefits and build on Scotland’s legacy on policy issues at *COP28*, *COP27* and *COP26*. They are also part of our international development offer, through our support for renewable energy and climate change initiatives.”

Scottish Government , 2024⁵

The final section on Reputation, Influence and Relationships looks at how the Scottish Government uses its international Network of offices, Scotland's strong nation brand and identity, and the connections with the Scottish diaspora to benefit the people of Scotland, and how the Government will deliver on our commitment to being a good global citizen.

Taking a feminist approach to international relations

In November 2023, the Scottish Government published Taking a feminist approach to international relations: position paper. The position paper set out a series of global challenges which include a gender dimension.

The Scottish Government explains that as part of its commitment to be a good global citizen, it will advance a feminist foreign policy:

“ The Scottish Government aims to be a good global citizen in everything we do internationally, making distinctive contributions to addressing these global challenges. As part of this the Scottish Government is committed to a feminist approach to international relations (*FAIR*). A feminist approach for Scotland will leverage all aspects of Scotland’s international policy to advance gender equality and the rights of women, girls and marginalised groups in pursuit of a fairer world. Our approach prioritises peace and gender equality, while also questioning and challenging existing power structures. We believe a feminist approach can support all international actors to advance a more equitable world.”

Scottish Government, 2023⁶

The position paper sets out how the Scottish Government's domestic and international policies will contribute to a feminist approach including highlighting the international development policy and climate justice, Scottish trade policy and securing peace and security to secure "democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights".

Scottish Connections Framework

On 11 April 2023, the Scottish Government published the Scottish Connections Framework, which set out the Scottish Government’s approach to engaging with Scotland’s diaspora.

The Framework covers a lot of ground setting out how the Scottish Government and its public bodies will build on existing activity to create an international network of Scottish connections. It sets out how, in the Government’s view, Scotland can better engage with its diaspora.

The Framework highlights actions in sectors that the Scottish Government regards as success stories – culture, higher education and tourism. In all these areas, the Framework seeks to develop Scotland’s international focus. In the area of trade, the Framework highlights a key role for the [Global Scots network](#) and [Trade and Investment Envoys](#).

The Framework also highlights the need to work with the Scottish global network including [Scottish Development International](#), [Visit Scotland](#) and the Government’s own network of nine international offices. It also highlights the importance of working with the UK Government, the other devolved administrations and the British Council.

The Scottish Government’s international offices are given a key role in delivering elements of the Framework. The offices are and will be responsible for engaging with the diaspora, including university alumni, in those countries. This will be supported by including a diaspora objective in all the Scottish Government’s international offices business plans.

To promote the aims of the Framework, the Scottish Government will pilot a Scottish Connections Fund which will:

“ support initiatives that bring together those with a connection to Scotland, promote Scotland’s reputation and interests, and build greater connections back to Scotland itself.”

Scottish Government, 2023⁷

The Framework does not indicate how much the Scottish Connections Fund will be worth,

instead indicating details will be made available this year.

Detailed analysis of the Scottish Connections Framework was [provided in a SPICe blog](#).

Engagement with the diaspora

A key section of the Framework focused on how Scotland can engage with its own diaspora.

Citing the importance of engaging with people with Scottish heritage, the Framework set out that:

“ the National Records of Scotland will continue to prioritise developing online and digital resources to help people from around the world engage with their records and services.”

Scottish Government, 2023⁷

The Scottish Government also committed to expanding its engagement with the diaspora and to support this by establishing a dedicated “Scottish Connections contact point” within the Scottish Government for diaspora engagement.

A key element of the Framework was a recognition that connecting with the diaspora using digital methods presented an opportunity to increase the depth of engagement with the diaspora right around the world. This recognition led to a number of commitments in the Framework including the creation of dedicated content within the website [Scotland.org](#) for the Scottish diaspora.

The Framework also recognised the value of social media and proposes the creation of a digital directory which contains a list of organisations around the world affiliated with Scotland.

Ireland Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework

The Ireland-Scotland Bilateral Cooperation Framework was published in November 2025. The framework was published following the conclusion of the [Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral Review 2021-2025](#) which had set out areas for bilateral cooperation and followed the establishment of the joint Scottish Irish review which SPICe published an [analysis of in 2019](#).

The framework provides "a high-level, action-oriented and forward-looking basis for cooperation between the Governments of Ireland and Scotland up to 2030" ⁸ .

It includes a focus for partnership on the following areas:

- Government to government relations
- Business and economic links
- Climate, energy and sustainability
- Education, research and innovation

- Communities and diaspora engagement
- Culture, language and sport.

Nordic Baltic Policy Statement

The Scottish Government published its updated Nordic Baltic Policy Statement in September 2017. Its primary purpose was to set out how the Scottish Government envisaged strengthening relationships with countries in the Nordic and Baltic regions by "promoting policy exchange and collaboration"⁹.

The policy statement sets out a series of case studies outlining the cooperation which took place prior to 2017, then sets out how the relationships can be developed further. A key aim was to promote stronger bilateral links with the countries in the region with specific actions set out for promoting Scotland's relationship with individual Nordic and Baltic countries.

Arctic Connections: Scotland's Arctic Policy Framework

In September 2019, the Scottish Government published its Arctic Policy Framework which sets out a "prospectus for cooperation, knowledge-exchange and policy partnerships between Scotland and the Arctic".

The framework stresses the links between Scotland and the Arctic:

“ Scotland's northernmost islands are closer to the Arctic Circle than they are to London. Connections between Scotland and the Arctic, however, go much further than geographical proximity. Our communities share deep cultural and social links as well as similar challenges and outlooks. Arctic countries represent important trading partners for Scotland and we have long worked together through European Union (EU) programmes.”

Scottish Government, 2019¹⁰

The framework sets out action for the future and focuses on the possibilities for relationships in the following policy areas:

- Education, research and innovation
- Cultural ties
- Rural connections
- Climate change, environment and clean energy
- Sustainable economic development

Finally the framework sets out what Scotland will offer the Arctic, leading with human connections and how the Scottish Government will seek to deliver the framework aims.

Global Citizenship: Scotland's International Development Strategy

The Scottish Government's most recent [international development strategy](#) was published in 2016 ¹¹. Framed around the theme of 'global citizenship', it pledged to implement the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) and named four partner countries: Malawi, Zambia, Rwanda, and Pakistan. No new international development strategy has been published since 2016, but in 2021 the Scottish Government [reviewed its international development policy](#) and set out that future development activity would include ¹²:

- focussing on **economic recovery** and **institutional resilience after the Covid-19 pandemic**
- establishing a **Global South Programme Panel** to provide advice to Ministers
- updating funding criteria to **remove the requirement that funding be accessed only by organisations in Scotland**, and
- **refining the support provided** to address "an ongoing concern that Scotland's focus is too broad given the current constitutional arrangements".

Further to the review, in 2024 the Scottish Government set out (in its [Contribution to International Development Report 2021-2023](#) and [International Strategy](#)) that future international development programmes will have the following thematic areas of focus ¹³:

- **health programmes** focussing on tackling 'non-communicable diseases', such as heart disease, cancer, chronic respiratory disease, and diabetes
- **inclusive education programmes** focussing on improving access to education for girls and learners with additional support needs
- **equalities programmes** aimed at supporting the advancement of gender equality, the rights of women and girls, and the protection of vulnerable groups.

Scottish Government's international footprint

In August 2022, the then First Minister opened the Scottish Government's latest international office in Copenhagen. This new office brought the number of Scottish Government international offices to nine (including London).

This map of the world shows the location of the Scottish Government's nine international offices.

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According to the [Scottish Government](#), the purpose of the international offices is:

“ to promote Scottish interests overseas and strengthen our relationships with countries and continents.”

Scottish Government, 2026¹⁴

The Government set out the role and objectives of the offices on [its website](#):

“ These offices deliver and support our activity, agencies and public and private partners in key locations outside Scotland, building on established expertise. The network provides a focus for Scottish partners needing presence in a country, capital or continent. They play a critical role in supporting international collaboration which delivers economic benefits and helps address societal and global challenges. The scale, scope and focus of this activity varies depending on the specific opportunities in a particular location. However, as a whole, the network will make connections in the development of policy priorities for us to exchange good practice. The work of our offices includes:”

- improving Scotland's international profile”
- attracting investment”
- helping businesses to trade internationally”
- promoting and securing research and innovation capability, partnerships and funding”
- facilitating cultural exchanges and events”
- protecting and enhancing Scotland's interests in the EU and beyond.”

Scottish Government, 2026¹⁴

The Scottish Government has published details of the aims of each of its international offices on its website.

Scottish Parliament engagement

The Scottish Parliament's Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee (CEEAC) undertook two enquiries related to the Scottish Government's international policy during Session 6.

Firstly CEEAC undertook an [Inquiry into the Scottish Government's International Work](#) leading to the publication of its report on 6 April 2022. The key themes identified by the Committee in its report were ¹⁵ :

- the importance of adopting a strategic approach to the Scottish Government's international engagement.
- the need for a prioritisation of policies to flow from that approach
- an emphasis on effective collaboration across government to encourage policy coherence in relation both to external affairs and how this interacts with domestic priorities
- challenges in measuring the impact of the Scottish Government's international engagement and
- how the Parliament can enhance scrutiny of the Scottish Government's international engagement. This included a recommendation that the Scottish Government publish an annual report to set out the contribution of the international offices. This recommendation was accepted by the Scottish Government

In October 2024, CEEAC published a report focused on the [Review of Outcomes and Indicators relating to the Scottish Government's International Work](#).

The review of outcomes and indicators report welcomed the Scottish Government's first annual report which set out the contribution of international offices. The Committee made the following recommendations:

“ The Committee welcomes the publication at the end of last year of the International network: annual report 2022-2023, the first such report to set out the contribution made by the international offices to promoting the values, objectives and priorities of Scotland’s International Strategy, and a key recommendation from our 2022 inquiry. We note that monitoring and evaluation is underway for the second such report and welcome the Cabinet Secretary’s assurances that the approach will be to continue to refine and improve these reports to ensure accountability and transparency in how the network is delivering against its objectives. Given the passage of time, as well as the outcome of the recent UK General Election, we ask the Scottish Government to provide an update on the status of the 2013 Concordat on International Relations with the UK Government and how it now fits with the relatively new Intergovernmental Review structure and arrangements. The Committee supports a more collaborative approach between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on international engagement and we will ask the UK Government to provide an update on progress in delivering this approach. We ask the Scottish Government to reflect on the evidence in this inquiry and, in its response to this report, provide some examples of where it has been able to learn lessons from other small countries or sub-states and their approach to international work, or vice versa, particularly concerning the evaluation of that work. The Committee notes the commitment to review The Scottish Connections Framework every two years; and we ask the Scottish Government to set out in its response to this report, as well as to inform the next iteration of that Framework, what its future engagement with the diaspora – in all its varied forms – will look like in terms of the extent to which it will be supported, what is hoped to be achieved in economic and cultural terms, and how it will be evaluated. Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the Scottish Government undertakes to publish a report every two years based on its review of the Framework and setting out the contribution made by its work with the diaspora in terms of promoting the values, objectives and priorities of Scotland’s International Strategy.”

Scottish Parliament Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 2024¹⁶

Scottish Government Annual Reports on international engagement

The Scottish Government published its first International Network Annual Report in [December 2023](#)¹⁷. A further report was published in [November 2024](#)¹⁸.

On 12 November 2025, the Scottish Government published its [International strategy: annual report 2024 to 2025](#)¹⁹. Whilst the Scottish Government's previous annual reports focused on the work of the Scottish Government's international network, this latest report looks more widely to focus on work to deliver the Scottish Government's International Strategy.

The report for 2024-25 included a number of case studies and provided information about international engagement under the same policy themes set out in the International Strategy:

- Economy, trade and investment
- Climate change, biodiversity and renewable energy
- Reputation, influence and relationships

The 2024-25 report also includes a section summarising the work of the Germany Office which took place around the Scottish men's football team's participation in Euro 2024.

“ The Scottish Government Germany office undertook an ambitious six-month programme in preparation for *EURO* 2024, taking advantage of the visibility afforded Scotland by being drawn against Germany for the opening match to advance Scottish interests in Germany across all three of our headline international objectives. This effort spanned the period from the group stage draw in December 2023 through to the conclusion of the group stage in June 2024.”

Scottish Government, 2025¹⁹

The report also set out details of the Scottish Government's international engagement on key global issues such as Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, events in the Middle East, the climate crisis, and challenges around global trade, energy and cost of living. Much of this engagement is focused on Scotland's relationship with the European Union and highlights the work of Scotland House in Brussels.

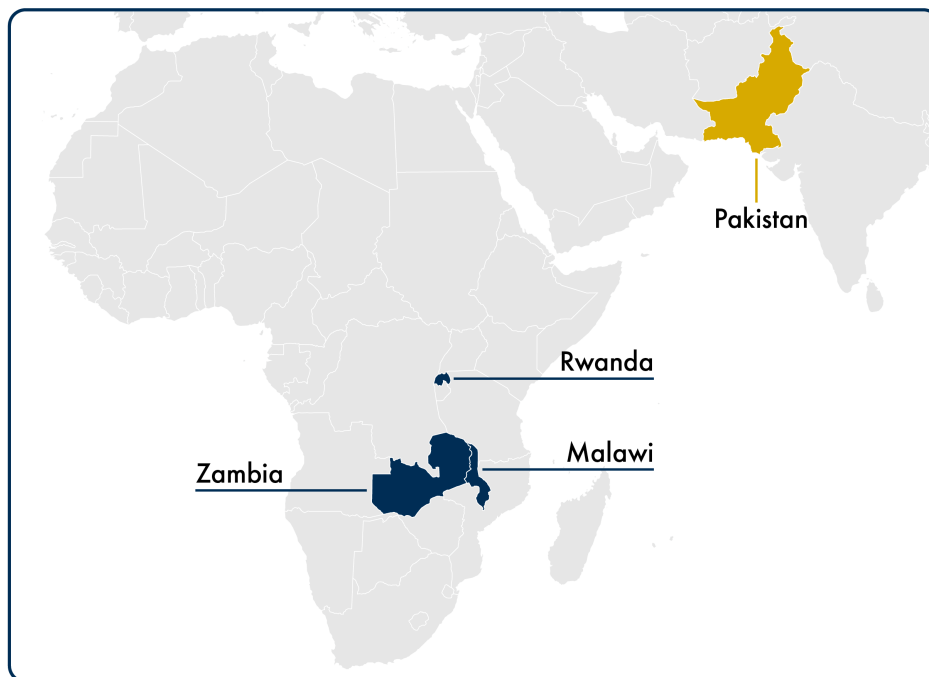
International Development policy

The Scottish Government has maintained an international development programme for over twenty years. Initially based on a cooperation agreement with the Malawi Government signed in 2005, the programme has expanded to include engagement in four partner countries across a range of policy areas. SPICe has [published a blog](#) providing background on the evolution of the programme.

What support for international development does the Scottish Government provide?

[International development support](#) is provided in four partner countries: Malawi, Zambia, Rwanda and Pakistan (in relation to education).

Scotland's partner countries for international development



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As set out in the [section on Scotland's International Development Strategy](#), Scottish Government support for international development is currently focussed on health (in particular non-communicable diseases), inclusive education and equalities ¹¹. It is generally delivered through partnerships with NGOs, charities and other institutions in Scotland and partner countries. The [Scottish Government's international development webpage](#) provides information on current initiatives.

The [Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on International Development](#) published a [report on international development funding](#) in June 2025. The Group [made a number of](#)

[recommendations including](#) ²⁰ :

- Greater transparency on spending,
- an updated international development strategy, and
- regular parliamentary scrutiny of development support.

The Scottish Government [responded in January 2026](#), outlining steps taken in response to the report.

International development funding

[Official development assistance](#) (ODA) is government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries. ODA provided by the Scottish Government is included in the UK Government's return to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). [Provisional figures for 2025](#) indicate that Scottish Government ODA amounted to £24 million, representing around 0.2% of total UK ODA ²¹ .

The 2026/27 Scottish Budget [includes the following allocations](#) ²² :

- The [International Development Fund](#) and the [Humanitarian Emergency Fund](#) (combined) receive £16 million, of which £1 million is ringfenced for humanitarian aid.
- The [Climate Justice Fund](#) receives £12.7 million.

Internationally, 2024 and 2025 saw significant reductions in global aid, driven by spending cuts from major donor countries. [Preliminary OECD data published in April 2026](#) indicates that ODA fell by 23% in real terms in 2025 compared with 2024, following a smaller (6%) reduction in 2024. This represents the largest annual contraction on record ²³ .

Ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election, the [Scottish National Party manifesto](#) stated that it would ²⁴ :

- increase the £15 million International Development Fund by at least 25% by the end of the Parliament
- continue support through the Climate Justice Fund and the Humanitarian Emergency Fund
- create an 'aid match' scheme with the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund.

The Scottish Government's proposals for an independent Scotland's place in the world

The Session 6 Scottish Government published two position papers relevant to an independent Scotland and foreign policy as part of its [Building a New Scotland Series](#).

- [An independent Scotland in the EU](#) (published in November 2023)
- [An independent Scotland's Place in the World](#) (published in March 2024)

SPICe published blogs analysing both documents shortly after their publication:

- [Scottish Government proposal for an independent Scotland in the EU](#)
- [Defence and foreign policy in an independent Scotland – the Scottish Government's proposals for Scotland's place in the world](#)

The External Affairs budget

The 2026-27 allocates £34.504 million to External Affairs. Of this, £34.389 million are allocated to International and European Relations, with the remaining £115,000 allocated to the British Irish Council ²².

The International and European Relations budget comprises 14 budget lines. Figures are rounded to the first decimal place so may not sum exactly.

International and European Relations budget

Level 4 budget line	2026-27 Budget (£)
External Affairs Advice and Policy (Scotland)	7.1 million
Scottish Affairs Office China	411,000
Scottish Affairs Office United States	677,000
Scottish Affairs Office Canada	481,000
International Development Fund	16 million
International Relations	260,000
Brand Scotland Policy and Co-ordination	1.2 million
European Strategy	180,000
Scottish Government Office Paris	541,000
Scottish Government Office Copenhagen	563,000
Brussels Office	1.9 million
Scotland House: London	4.1 million
Scottish Government Office Dublin	496,000
Scottish Government Office Berlin	483,000
Total	34.4 million

Scottish Government, 2026²²

The total allocation for the International and European Relations budget 2026/27 represents an increase of 29.5% on the 2025/26 allocation (Autumn Budget revision).

Please note that the [Climate Justice Fund](#), which is one of the Scottish Government's vehicles for international development funding and receives £12.7 million, is funded from the Climate Action and Energy budget (International Climate Change budget line).

Scrutiny of external affairs policy in Session 7

During Session 7, committees and MSPs scrutiny of the Scottish Government's external affairs policies will be aided by the information provided by the Scottish Government in its International Network Annual Report. These reports will provide details of both the policies pursued and also the outcomes by way of a number of case studies.

In a policy area where tangible benefits and outcomes are often difficult to identify, the International Network Annual Report will be an important focus for Parliament.

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