

Rural Affairs Committee
Wednesday 7 October 2026
7th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Pre-budget scrutiny and Programme for Government

Introduction

1. The Committee agreed to take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs and the Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands on the Scottish Government's priorities for the Rural Affairs portfolio.
2. The session will cover the Scottish Government's recently published [Programme for Government](#), as it relates to rural affairs, and consider pre-budget topics raised with the Committee throughout the Session so far.

Budget and policy context

Pre-budget scrutiny

3. Pre-budget scrutiny is a central part of the Scottish Parliament's annual budget process. It allows committees to gather evidence—usually between June and October—and make recommendations while the Scottish Government is developing its Budget, ahead of its usual publication in December. It forms part of a year-round budget process, established following the 2017 [Budget Process Review Group report](#), with the stated aim of allowing committees to influence the Budget's formulation rather than scrutinise it only after publication.
4. This year, the Rural Affairs Committee agreed to take a broad approach to pre-budget scrutiny rather than focusing on a single policy area. Key areas within the portfolio which the Committee may discuss include: agriculture, rural strategy, public service reform (as it relates to rural affairs), marine policy, animal welfare, land reform, forestry and peatland restoration.

Programme for Government

5. The Programme for Government 2026–31 sets a five-year direction, supported by annual updates aligned with the Scottish Budget.
6. It sets four priorities:
 - eradicating child poverty;
 - growing the economy;
 - tackling the climate and nature crises; and

- strengthening public services.
7. In the rural affairs portfolio, key announcements include:
- continued delivery of the new agricultural support framework and Rural Support Plan¹;
 - public-service reform proposals relating to Scottish Forestry and public bodies managing public land assets;
 - support for the fishing sector through the Marine Fund Scotland and quota management and licensing;
 - to “consult on fisheries management measures for inshore marine protected areas and priority marine features”;
 - restating that they will restore 400,000 hectares of peatland by 2040
 - a commitment to “establish a new ‘Last Provider Fund’ to support the sustainability of the last remaining shops and pubs in rural and island communities”; and
 - a commitment to continue development of a “Rural Renewal Bill” with key stakeholders.
8. In the relatively short time since its establishment in June, the Committee has taken evidence on some of the key budget and priorities issues in their remit – these are outlined briefly below. This is not an exhaustive list, and the Committee may choose to raise other issues in the remit throughout the session.

Key issues in the Rural Affairs Portfolio

9. **Rural Renewal Bill:** The Scottish Government’s [plans for the first 100 days of government in Session 7](#) committed to begin engagement on a Rural Renewal Bill. [A recent letter to the Committee](#) and [written answer on 23 September](#) stated that engagement with people, communities and organisations had begun over the summer, although the Committee has not seen the detail of this. Information available to date indicates that the Bill may cover land reform, planning reform, biodiversity and measures for rural proofing.
10. **Public Sector Reform:** The Scottish Government’s public sector reform agenda cuts across committee remits - key commitments are relevant to this committee are to:
- “Bring the national environment public bodies (SEPA, NatureScot, Zero Waste Scotland and potentially Scottish Forestry) into a single

¹ During the earlier part of this meeting, the Committee will take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary and Minister on the Rural Support Plan. As such, this topic will largely be covered then.

overarching environment body to remove unnecessary barriers and make our environmental interventions more impactful”, and

- “Investigate consolidation of all public bodies involved in the management of public land assets.”

11. **Marine and fisheries:** The Committee has heard concerns from stakeholders that resource pressures within the Marine Directorate² may affect delivery. Its 2026-27 budget is £79.3 million, unchanged in cash terms but £1.7 million lower in real terms than 2025-26, representing a third consecutive annual real-terms reduction.
12. The Committee has also heard concerns that several delays in the previous session to consultations and the lack of clarity on [plans for the National Marine Plan 2](#) are affecting marine and fisheries policies.
13. **Forestry:** Woodland creation funding is the central forestry budget issue. The [2026–2040 Climate Change Plan](#) commits to planting 12,000 hectares in 2026–27, with the annual target rising by 2,000 hectares to reach 18,000 hectares by 2029–30. Against this ambition, the 2026–27 Forestry Grant Scheme budget is £58.6 million.
14. [Evidence taken during the Committee’s meeting with forestry stakeholders on 23 September](#) raised challenges facing the sector, including business confidence, budgetary pressures to reach woodland creation targets, and workforce pressures. Witnesses also expressed concern to the Committee that public service reform could undermine forestry delivery.
15. **Peatland restoration:** [stakeholders shared positive success stories with the Committee around peatland restoration in Scotland](#), but still raised challenges for the period ahead, including the annual funding cycle, workforce development, and the need to move to larger “landscape-scale” approaches to restoration.

Meeting on 7 October

16. On 7 October, the Committee will take evidence from-

- Gillian Martin MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs; and Jim Fairlie MSP the Minister for Agriculture, Marine, and the Islands on the Scottish Government’s priorities for the Rural Affairs portfolio across the Programme for Government and 2027-28 Budget.

17. Ministers will be supported by the following officials:

- Sean Neill – Director, Energy & Climate Change

² NB: The Marine Directorate, unlike the other public bodies identified in the Programme for Government, is a Directorate of the Scottish Government rather than an executive non-departmental public body.

RA/S7/26/7/3

- Rebecca Hackett - Deputy Director, Marine Directorate
- John Kerr – Head of Agriculture Policy
- Clare Morley – CARA Portfolio Finance Lead

Clerks to the Committee

October 2026