



MODERN SCOT

Distinctly Scottish



ISSUE 06

16 JULY 2026

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 15 July 2026

CoreWeave Wanted More Scottish Data Centres

Read online: <https://modern.scot/coreweave-told-ministers-it-wanted-four-more-scottish-data-centres/>



Internal papers show the American AI company wanted to expand rapidly after its first Lanarkshire facility. The same documents warn that accommodating a data centre could delay electricity projects needed for Clean Power 2030, while promised jobs, community benefits and access to computing capacity remained under discussion.

The documents were published by the Scottish

Government on 15 July 2026 following a freedom of information request.

CoreWeave told Scottish ministers that it wanted to move urgently towards building four more data centres in Scotland after establishing its initial facility, according to internal government papers released under freedom of information law.

A briefing prepared for the First Minister records that Mike Mattacola, then CoreWeave's UK general manager, had expressed a wish to invest further in Scotland and build another four centres. He regarded Scotland as capable of meeting the company's demand for lower-carbon electricity and commercially attractive because grid constraints had created what the document called "significant pockets of inexpensive power".

The papers do not establish that CoreWeave submitted four planning applications, selected four sites or committed financing to four completed projects. They record an expansion ambition conveyed to ministers while the company and DataVita were seeking government assistance with electricity connections, planning and coordination.

The disclosure nevertheless widens the potential scale of the development beyond the Lanarkshire AI Growth Zone announced by the UK Government in January.

That announcement said £8.2 billion of private investment would create more than 3,400 jobs. Around 800 were expected to include AI researchers, programmers and permanent data-centre workers; the remainder were described principally as construction jobs. The government's own notes state that the employment and investment figures were supplied by DataVita. The Growth Zone designation is also conditional upon delivery milestones and continued compliance with legal and regulatory requirements.

Government support began before the winning bid was selected

The newly released records show that Scotland attracted considerable early interest. Officials recorded 41 bids relating to Scottish sites during the first phase of the UK competition, four of which were considered to have high potential because of their power-delivery timescales and wider proposition.

Scottish officials initially decided it would be inappropriate for the Deputy First Minister to endorse individual proposals when so many were competing. A general letter of support was instead offered to all

Scottish bidders, describing Scotland as a natural location for AI Growth Zones and promising support where local considerations allowed.

Once DataVita's proposal had advanced, the approach became more concentrated. A First Minister's briefing said the Scottish Government wanted to facilitate the investment, maximise its economic value and "find a path through" grid-connection and planning problems. DataVita and CoreWeave wanted a dedicated taskforce addressing planning, power and coordination between industry and national and local government.

Officials proposed a "Team Scotland" response involving the Scottish Government, the UK Government, North Lanarkshire Council, Scottish Enterprise, ScottishPower Energy Networks and the National Energy System Operator. CoreWeave had also met Scottish planning officials to discuss the system and build confidence in the process.

The records do not show ministers ordering an approval or granting CoreWeave a preferred electricity connection. They expressly recognise that network operators must avoid undue discrimination and that Scottish ministers cannot direct the system operator or ScottishPower to move a data centre ahead of other applicants.

Cheap power for whom?

The reference to "inexpensive power" arises from an awkward feature of Scotland's electricity system.

At certain times, renewable generators can produce more electricity than the transmission network can carry to demand elsewhere. Generators may then be paid to reduce output. Placing a large electricity user near constrained generation could absorb some of that power rather than allowing it to be curtailed.

That does not mean Scottish households would receive the same inexpensive electricity. DataVita says its model relies upon renewable-energy parks connected directly to data-centre substations through private wires. It claims this could deliver power below 10p per kilowatt-hour because much of the electricity would avoid public-network, balancing and policy charges. The grid would provide backup when private generation was unavailable. Those figures and anticipated savings are company projections.

The internal government assessment says using data centres to absorb constrained electricity may appear a neat solution, but is "significantly more challenging" in practice. Scotland's electricity network is already heavily constrained, while manufacturers' order books for cables and substation equipment are filled years in advance. Available equipment is already assigned to transmission reinforcement and customers holding connection offers.

The strongest warning in the papers is that ScottishPower Energy Networks had advised that projects critical to the UK's Clean Power 2030 programme could potentially be delayed to accommodate a data-centre connection, even if regulations were changed to permit prioritisation.

That warning deserves greater attention than the general proposition that data centres might reduce curtailment. A project could absorb surplus renewable power once connected, while still competing for the cables, substations and reinforcement required to connect housing, renewable generation and other industries.

No published project-level assessment yet shows which infrastructure would be needed for the Lanarkshire development, who would finance it, which existing projects might be displaced or what proportion of its electricity would be drawn from the public system before its proposed energy parks became operational.

Planning policy already favours green data-centre development

Scottish planning policy designates green data centres as national developments. According to the due-diligence assessment, this means the principle of the development does not have to be established again during later consenting processes.

The papers also point to Masterplan Consent Areas, which can provide planning permission, road-construction consent and certain heritage consents in advance, removing the need for separate applications.

That does not amount to automatic approval. The government's assessment says developers must still present a strong case under National Planning Framework 4 and engage robustly with the planning authority. Officials were also conscious that ministers might later have a formal decision-making role and recorded the need to keep investor engagement separate from subsequent planning decisions.

North Lanarkshire Council was already increasing staffing in planning, building standards and environmental services "at risk", before the corresponding development income was assured. It was considering changes to its education curriculum in anticipation of employment linked to the Growth Zone. Scottish Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland were also reorganising work around data centres, investment and prospective employees.

Jobs and benefits were still being negotiated

The documents do not establish a firm CoreWeave employment commitment for the four additional centres.

Before the November meeting, Scottish officials said they wanted to understand what skills and employment commitments CoreWeave was considering. They were also instructed to ask what the company would bring through partnerships with universities, Scotland's technology sector and environmental measures.

A DataVita community blueprint was projected internally to produce £36 million a year and £550 million over 15 years, although officials noted that work with partners was continuing. The later public announcement gave a slightly lower figure of up to £543 million and said the fund would grow as data-centre capacity came online.

The records also show that government and council officials were still deciding what additional public value should be secured. North Lanarkshire Council was considering local benefits, while the Scottish Government was examining whether computing capacity could be made available to universities and technology partners. The status of the community blueprint was still listed as an action to be confirmed.

Those are aspirations rather than published contractual conditions. The released material does not identify enforceable guarantees covering the number of permanent Scottish jobs, local recruitment, university access, procurement from Scottish suppliers or the delivery timetable for the community fund.

Water and the two-site proposal

The due-diligence assessment also reveals unresolved water questions.

It says a disused reservoir about three kilometres from one proposed site might reduce demand on the drinking-water system. Further investigation was required to establish how much water could be removed without environmental harm. A drainage-impact assessment might also be necessary, together with possible network upgrades. Officials concluded that a feasible solution appeared possible, but only after timescales, costs and environmental feasibility had been established.

The assessment describes the DataVita bid as spanning two sites in North and South Lanarkshire, with adjacent renewable-energy parks intended to supply hyperscale data centres and AI innovation parks. It also refers to potential heat reuse for facilities including the new Monklands hospital.

The later public announcement centred upon DataVita's existing site around Airdrie in North Lanarkshire. The released annex does not identify the complete boundaries of both original sites. Land ownership, acreage, remediation details and parts of the planning assessment remain redacted as commercially confidential.

The public can therefore see that a two-site regional proposal was assessed, but cannot reconstruct the full bid, determine how the South Lanarkshire element evolved or match every investment and employment claim to a named parcel of land and consented development.

Before another four centres move beyond an expression of interest, the public account should identify their proposed locations, electricity requirements, network consequences, permanent employment, water demand and binding local benefits.

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TRANSPORT | 15 July 2026

Highlands International Journeys to Lose Tax Exemption

Read online: <https://modern.scot/highlands-international-journeys-to-lose-tax-exemption-under-scotlands-new-air-levy/>



Domestic connections serving the Highlands and Islands will receive wider protection when Air Departure Tax begins in April 2027, but direct and connecting international journeys will become taxable despite opposition from most respondents who answered that part of the government consultation.

Passengers beginning an overseas journey at a Highlands and Islands airport will lose a long-standing aviation tax exemption when Scotland's Air Departure Tax comes into force on 1 April 2027.

The Scottish Government confirmed on Wednesday that domestic connections will remain protected and, in some cases, receive a wider exemption than they do under the present UK system. The quieter part of the decision is that international journeys beginning at airports including Inverness, Kirkwall, Stornoway and Sumburgh will become liable for the new Scottish levy.

The change will apply to direct international flights and connecting journeys booked through another airport. An Inverness to Amsterdam journey, currently exempt from UK Air Passenger Duty, will become taxable. The same will apply to a through-ticket from Inverness to Dubai via Heathrow, even though the first flight remains within the UK.

Air Departure Tax will replace Air Passenger Duty on flights beginning at Scottish airports. The Scottish Parliament passed the enabling legislation in 2017, but implementation was delayed after concerns that reproducing the existing Highlands and Islands exemption might breach state-aid rules, since replaced by the UK subsidy-control system. The Scottish Government says it has now developed a narrower exemption capable of meeting those requirements.

Under the final proposal, journeys beginning at a Highlands and Islands airport will remain exempt where the passenger's final destination is within the UK. Flights beginning at another Scottish airport and ending in the Highlands and Islands will also become exempt for the first time.

This means that an Aberdeen to Sumburgh flight, which is presently taxable, will become exempt. Both directions of an Edinburgh–Kirkwall or Glasgow–Stornoway return journey will receive protection under the Scottish scheme. Flights beginning elsewhere in the UK, such as Heathrow to Inverness, remain subject to UK Air Passenger Duty because Scotland cannot determine tax on journeys beginning outside Scotland.

The exemption covers airports at Barra, Benbecula, Campbeltown, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall, Lerwick, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Tiree and Wick John O'Groats. It is based upon the designated geographical region rather than the passenger's home address, so visitors and residents receive the same treatment.

Deputy First Minister and Finance Secretary Jenny Gilruth said the domestic exemptions recognised the

region's particular connectivity problems and would help people and businesses. The government also confirmed that a separate supplement for private jets is intended from April 2028.

The domestic protection has broad support. Of the 47 consultation respondents who answered the relevant question, 85 per cent strongly or mostly agreed that journeys from Highlands and Islands airports to destinations elsewhere in the UK should remain exempt. Ninety-one per cent supported extending the exemption to flights arriving in the region from other Scottish airports.

The position changed when respondents were asked about international travel.

Of the 40 people and organisations that answered whether international journeys should lose the exemption, 23 disagreed and 17 agreed. Ten Highlands and Islands respondents strongly opposed the removal, while three supported it wholly or partly. The consultation was self-selecting and cannot be treated as a representative poll, but the regional opposition was pronounced.

The consultation process itself contained an unfortunate error. The original online form duplicated an earlier question and omitted the question concerning international flights. Nine people had already submitted responses before the mistake was corrected. Seven of those responses were later excluded from the analysis of the international proposal because answers could not be obtained. The government apologised and invited further views by email.

Respondents warned that removing the exemption could weaken already limited international connectivity. Particular concern centred on the Inverness–Amsterdam service and the possibility that increased costs could reduce passenger demand on routes operating with narrow commercial margins.

The International Air Transport Association told the consultation that 81 per cent of journeys beginning at Highlands and Islands airports involved connections. Airlines and regional organisations argued that taxing the full journey could encourage passengers to drive or travel by rail to Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen before beginning an overseas trip, transferring demand away from regional airports.

The Scottish Government accepts that the policy will increase costs. For an economy passenger travelling from the region to a European destination, the tax charged to the carrier will be £15.49 in 2027–28. By contrast, the new exemption on an inbound domestic journey from another Scottish airport will reduce the carrier's tax cost by £8.26 per economy passenger. Airlines may absorb those amounts or reflect them in fares.

Longer international journeys carry a much larger charge. The reduced economy rate will be £105.33 for destinations between 2,001 and 5,500 miles and £109.46 for destinations beyond 5,500 miles. Connected flights shown on the same or associated tickets are treated as one journey, with the final destination determining the tax band. A passenger connecting through a UK airport will not pay both Scottish Air Departure Tax and UK Air Passenger Duty.

The government's reason for narrowing the exemption is competition law. It argues that exempting international services from Inverness while airlines serving Edinburgh, Glasgow or Aberdeen must pay the tax could distort decisions about where routes are based. Edinburgh Airport told the consultation that the existing international exemption gave Inverness an artificial competitive advantage, while environmental respondents argued that overseas leisure travel should not receive the same protection as essential domestic connectivity.

Highlands organisations offered alternatives, including a lower international rate, preserving the exemption for the domestic section of a connecting journey or limiting relief to economy passengers. The government

says no workable alternative emerged that would protect international journeys while satisfying subsidy-control requirements and avoiding competition distortion. It will therefore remove the exemption for both direct and connecting overseas travel.

The decision has been taken before the government has published a full quantified assessment of the regional consequences. Wednesday's report does not state how many passengers will become taxable, how much revenue will be raised from them, or what reduction in demand the government expects at Inverness and other regional airports. Formal impact assessments are promised alongside the secondary legislation before the tax begins.

The new structure resolves the legal obstacle that delayed Scotland's devolved aviation tax for nearly a decade. It also draws a firm line through the meaning of essential connectivity. Domestic journeys receive wider protection; international access does not.

For communities whose nearest practical route overseas begins with a flight from an island or northern airport, that distinction is less tidy than it appears in the tax code. The cost may arrive as £15.49 on a European fare or more than £100 on a long-haul journey. The wider effect on routes, business travel and passenger behaviour remains to be measured after the policy decision has already been made.

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 14 July 2026

Amendment Would Criminalise Gaelic Language

Read online: <https://modern.scot/amendment-would-criminalise-gaelic-language/>



A proposal submitted at Westminster would allow election publications only in English or Welsh. Gaelic is neither named nor protected. If adopted, the clause would make Gaelic-only regulated campaign material a criminal offence in Scotland.

New Clause 107 to the Representation of the People Bill was tabled by Richard Tice and supported by Lee Anderson, Sarah Pochin, Danny Kruger, Robert Jenrick, Andrew Rosindell and Suella Braverman.

The clause, titled “Requirement that political literature be in English or Welsh”, would prohibit the printing or publication of election bills, placards, posters and other regulated documents unless they were written in one of those two languages.

The restriction would also apply to election material published by political parties. Breaching it could lead to a fine or imprisonment for up to six months. Candidates, election agents, registered parties and party officers could also be found to have committed an illegal electoral practice.

The explanatory statement says the clause would require election material to be published “only in English or Welsh”.

The effect in Scotland would be stark. A party could publish a Welsh-language leaflet in Lewis, Skye or Inverness, while a Gaelic-language leaflet distributed in the same places would fall outside the permitted wording. Scots, Irish, Cornish and Ulster Scots are also excluded.

This is not government policy and it is not law. New Clause 107 is an opposition amendment to a Labour Government bill. Even if it is defeated, however, the proposal is not politically harmless.

Seven MPs have formally suggested that democratic communication in Scotland should be restricted to English and Welsh, with criminal penalties available against those who cross that boundary.

The clause is new. The belief behind it, that a dominant culture may decide where another people’s language is permitted to exist, is centuries old.

Languages are rarely destroyed by a single decree. They are weakened through a succession of exclusions.

Not in this school.

Not in this court.

Not in this office.

Not on this form.

Not during this election.

Each restriction may be presented as narrow, orderly or practical. Together, they reduce a living language to something tolerated in songs, ceremonies and museums but excluded from power.

The United States provides a documented warning of what can follow when contempt for an Indigenous culture is allowed to become administration.

For generations, Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian children were removed from their families and sent to federal boarding schools intended to assimilate them into the dominant society.

The schools formed part of a wider system of territorial dispossession and cultural destruction. Children were given English names, had their hair cut and were discouraged or prevented from speaking their own languages or practising their religions and traditions.

The US Department of the Interior has identified 408 federal boarding schools operating between 1819 and 1969, including 21 in Alaska. Its investigation found marked or unmarked burial sites at approximately 53 schools and described a system intended to achieve cultural assimilation through the forced removal of Indigenous children.

In 2024, the President of the United States formally apologised for a programme the federal government acknowledges sought to erase Native cultures and assimilate Native children.

New Clause 107 is not a boarding-school system. Gaelic-speaking children are not being removed from their homes under its provisions, and the histories should not be treated as identical.

The warning lies in the attitude that comes first.

The United States did not begin by openly declaring that it intended to destroy languages carried by peoples who had lived on the continent for thousands of years. Suppression was described as education, advancement, integration and national unity.

The dominant culture appointed itself the judge of which languages belonged in public life. Indigenous languages were treated as barriers to progress rather than repositories of law, memory, knowledge and identity.

The same assumption underlies any proposal declaring that one historic language may be used in democratic speech while another may not.

Importance of Gaelic in Scottish Culture

Gaelic is not a foreign intrusion into Scotland. It has been spoken on this land since long before the modern British state existed. It carries place names, literature, music, memory and an understanding of Scotland formed centuries before any MP now sitting at Westminster acquired the power to legislate.

Its speakers do not require permission from Reform UK to address one another in their own country.

The amendment's supporters may argue that elections require a common language or that multilingual campaigning allows parties to send different messages to different communities.

Concerns about inconsistent or misleading campaign material can be addressed by requiring parties to publish translations, retain public archives of every version and accept responsibility for every claim they distribute.

The answer is transparency.

The answer is not to criminalise the language.

Restricting Gaelic would not make elections more honest. It would decide which voters may be addressed in the language of their community and which must accept the language selected for them by Parliament.

The protection of Welsh also exposes the weakness of any claim that the amendment is simply about administrative clarity. Welsh is properly protected. Gaelic is not. No explanation is offered for why one historic language of these islands is authorised while another is excluded.

The result is discriminatory. There is no need to speculate about private motives. The wording permits English and Welsh, excludes Gaelic and attaches criminal penalties to the distinction.

Cultural contempt is not always expressed through declarations of hatred. It can be written into rules that define one culture as normal and another as an exception to be managed, restricted or removed.

Unchecked disdain becomes exclusion. Exclusion becomes policy. Policy shapes institutions and public life. A generation later, the decline produced by those decisions is described as though it happened naturally.

The amendment should be withdrawn. Every MP who signed it should explain why Welsh was protected while Gaelic was left outside the law.

Gaelic belongs in Scotland's elections because Gaelic belongs in Scotland.

Parliament may regulate campaign finance, imprints and electoral conduct. It has no moral authority to declare the historic language of a people unfit for democratic speech.

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COMMUNITY | 14 July 2026

Liberton Fire Station Rebuild Begins in £10 Million Project

Read online: <https://modern.scot/liberton-fire-station-rebuild-begins-in-10-million-project/>



The 50-year-old station has closed and crews have moved to a temporary base while a replacement is built over the next 15 to 18 months.

Work has begun to demolish and rebuild Liberton Community Fire Station in Edinburgh as part of an estimated £10 million project.

The replacement will be the first new fire station built in Edinburgh for more than 30 years and the first anywhere in Scotland since the creation of the national Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in 2013.

The existing station has now closed. Its appliance and crew have moved to a temporary facility on Alnwickhill Road, supported by neighbouring stations including Newcraighall. Residents in the area have been told to expect more fire appliance movements during construction.

The rebuild is expected to take between 15 and 18 months.

Liberton remains an important location for emergency response across Edinburgh and the east of Scotland. SFRS said national modelling carried out during its Service Delivery Review confirmed the station's strategic role.

The project is part of a wider programme to deal with fire stations affected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, known as RAAC.

RAAC was widely used in public buildings during the second half of the 20th century. It is lighter than conventional concrete but can deteriorate with age, particularly where moisture or corrosion is present.

SFRS has already completed repair and upgrade work at Galashiels. Work is also planned at Livingston and Dalkeith, while stations at Cumbernauld, Hawick, Helensburgh, Milngavie and Tranent are due to be repaired or rebuilt.

The new Liberton station will include improved welfare facilities, a larger community space and dedicated areas for handling contaminated firefighting clothing and equipment.

These facilities are intended to reduce the risk of smoke, soot and other harmful residues being carried into clean areas of the station.

Area Commander David Dourley, the SFRS local senior officer for Edinburgh, said the project would improve both service delivery and firefighter safety.

"This is an exciting project and represents a significant investment to improve service delivery and firefighter safety," he said.

“This will be the first new-build station in Edinburgh in more than 30 years, directly replacing the former station that has faithfully served our staff and the community for 50 years.”

He said the replacement had been designed to meet operational demand and the changing needs of the surrounding communities.

The investment is welcome, but the £10 million figure remains an estimate. SFRS has not yet published a full breakdown of demolition, construction and contingency costs.

The temporary move also raises a practical question over response times while the work is under way. SFRS says emergency cover will be maintained, but the effect of the relocation should be tested against actual response data once the temporary arrangement is operating.

Liberton is one of several stations requiring major work, and the project highlights the wider condition of the fire service estate.

The new station should leave south Edinburgh with safer and more suitable facilities. The broader issue is whether the remaining RAAC-affected stations can be repaired or replaced at the same pace.

HERITAGE AND ARTS | 14 July 2026

The Quiet Charities Buying and Saving Scotland's Written History

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-quiet-charities-buying-and-saving-scotlands-written-history/>



Two newly published annual reports reveal how private charitable funds are helping Scottish libraries, archives and museums buy historic documents before they disappear into private collections, and repair fragile records that may otherwise become impossible to use.

A medieval Highland charter, letters signed by Mary of Guise, photographs of Perthshire farming and part of the literary archive of Kathleen Jamie have entered Scottish public collections with the help of charities

that remain largely unknown outside the library and archive world.

Two annual reports published by the Friends of the Nations' Libraries and the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust describe hundreds of grants made during 2025 to acquire and preserve books, manuscripts, maps, letters, photographs and official records.

The organisations are separate charities, but their work fits together.

The Friends of the Nations' Libraries helps public institutions buy important historical material. The National Manuscripts Conservation Trust helps them repair and preserve material that is already in their care.

In simple terms, one helps prevent history from being sold away. The other helps stop it from physically falling apart.

The Friends of the Nations' Libraries, known as FNL, was founded in 1931. Its purpose is to give financial support to publicly accessible libraries, archives, museums and record offices when important material becomes available for sale.

Historic documents are often sold through commercial auction houses. A local museum may recognise that a collection belongs in its area, but lack the money to compete against private collectors or overseas buyers.

FNL provides grants intended to close that gap. Its stated purpose includes saving important historical material for public collections and preventing manuscripts and rare books from leaving the country or disappearing from public access.

The charity awarded a record 79 grants during 2025. The grants were worth £386,712 and benefited more than 100 libraries and archives. Nine additional grants were offered, but the institutions concerned were outbid at auction before they could complete their purchases.

Some of the clearest Scottish benefits were seen in the Highlands.

Nairn Museum received £11,545, covering the full cost of four groups of manuscripts from Kilravock Castle. The documents date from the 14th to the 17th centuries and relate to Clan Rose, the government of the

Highlands, land rights, estate management and political authority.

The collection includes five letters signed by Mary of Guise, who governed Scotland as regent for her daughter, Mary, Queen of Scots, between 1554 and 1560. The letters were written to Hugh Rose, the 10th Baron of Kilravock, during a period of political tension and rebellion.

There is also a 1343 document describing customary rights connected with the Chapel of Kilravock, including grazing, livestock and shared resources. Another charter was issued by Euphemia, Countess of Ross, and provides evidence of the role played by noblewomen in medieval Highland government.

Nairn Museum said the acquisition meant manuscripts long connected with Kilravock could remain accessible in the region to which they belong.

Highland Archives separately received support to acquire legal and financial documents relating to the Hay family of Lochloy and Park, dating from 1503 to 1753. It also acquired an orderly book kept by the 2nd Battalion Caithness Volunteers between 1804 and 1808, recording part of the military and social history of Caithness during the Napoleonic period.

Other Scottish grants helped Aberdeen University acquire a rare French edition of Thucydides published in 1534, while Montrose Museum bought a 1632 Book of Common Prayer said to have belonged to Charles II and left at Cortachy Castle as the king fled a search party.

The National Library of Scotland received £20,000 towards an illuminated manuscript made by Esther Inglis, an early modern Scottish calligrapher and artist. A further £10,000 supported the acquisition of literary papers created by Kathleen Jamie between 1992 and 2025, bringing the library's Jamie collection up to the end of her period as Scotland's Makar.

Perth Archives received £263 to buy two albums of photographs showing farming and rural life in Perthshire during the early 20th century. Glasgow Life's acquisition of the Alasdair Gray archive was also recorded, supported by a £20,000 grant awarded in the previous financial year.

The second charity, the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust, or NMCT, begins its work after documents have entered a collection.

Paper, parchment, ink, photographs and bindings do not remain stable indefinitely. Documents can be damaged by damp, mould, insects, rusting staples, adhesive tape, unsuitable frames, poor storage or previous repairs carried out with materials now known to be harmful.

A manuscript may still exist but be too fragile to open. A map may tear whenever it is unfolded. Ink can corrode the paper beneath it. Bindings can break apart and loose pages can become detached or lost.

NMCT gives grants towards specialist conservation work. Conservators may clean and stabilise paper, repair tears, remove damaging tape and glue, rehouse documents in archival materials, treat mould or ink damage and prepare records for safe handling or digitisation.

The charity supports local authority archives, university collections, museums and specialist repositories. Applicants must show that the material has historical or educational value, that it will be stored properly and that reasonable public access will be provided. Directly government-funded national institutions are not normally eligible.

During 2025, NMCT considered 24 applications and approved 22 conservation grants worth £174,067, up from £142,545 during the previous year.

Its projects ranged from medieval religious manuscripts and architectural drawings to industrial records and evidence from the 1913 Senghenydd mining disaster. The trust also funded conservation internships intended to maintain the specialist skills needed to care for old documents.

In Scotland, NMCT has been working with the Scottish Council on Archives to increase awareness of available grants and provide expert advice on Scottish applications.

Both charities appear financially stable. NMCT reported income of £228,355, compared with £175,980 the year before, and net assets of approximately £2.84 million. FNL reported no material uncertainty about its ability to continue operating and ended the year with around £895,000 in cash.

The results are good news for Scotland because historically important material has remained in public hands and, in several cases, close to the communities from which it came.

They also expose a weakness in the way the national record is protected.

Some record offices have no acquisition budget at all. When local manuscripts appear at auction, the outcome may depend on whether a small institution notices the sale, prepares an application quickly enough and receives charitable support before another bidder takes the material away.

The nine failed FNL purchases show that charitable intervention does not always succeed. Once material enters a private collection, public access may be limited for decades or lost altogether.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 14 July 2026

Drilling Milestone Brings Orkney's First Transmission Link Closer to Shore

Read online: <https://modern.scot/drilling-milestone-brings-orkneys-first-transmission-link-closer-to-shore/>



Horizontal drilling beneath the Caithness coast has been completed at Dounreay, preparing the mainland landing point for a 53-kilometre subsea electricity cable linking Orkney to Britain's high-voltage transmission network.

A long-delayed connection between Orkney and the mainland electricity grid has passed one of its more difficult engineering stages, after crews completed horizontal directional drilling beneath the coastline at Dounreay.

The work created two underground ducts running from

the construction site to an offshore exit point. The ducts will eventually carry the subsea transmission cable ashore without requiring an open trench to be cut across the beach and nearshore area.

SSEN Transmission said the drilling was completed as part of the Orkney Link project, which is intended to connect the islands directly to Britain's electricity transmission system for the first time.

The wider scheme will run between a new substation at Finstown on the Orkney Mainland and a new facility at Dounreay West in Caithness. It includes about 14 kilometres of underground cable across Orkney, a 53-kilometre high-voltage alternating-current subsea cable through the Pentland Firth and a short underground connection into the mainland substation.

At Dounreay, drilling began early in 2026 and moved to continuous 24-hour operation in March. SSEN Transmission said round-the-clock working was required by the technical nature of the operation, with acoustic barriers, noise controls and monitoring used to limit disturbance.

The company has not described the drilling as the completion of the connection itself. Substation construction, underground cable works, the marine installation and testing remain to be finished before electricity can pass between Orkney and the mainland.

The link is designed to carry at least 220 megawatts. Its immediate purpose is to give renewable generators in Orkney access to the national market, overcoming a network constraint which has shaped energy development on the islands for years.

Orkney has been an important testing ground for wind, tidal, wave and hydrogen technologies, but its electricity system has remained connected to the mainland by lower-capacity distribution cables. That has limited the amount of new generation able to secure firm grid connections, even as the islands have frequently produced more electricity than they consume locally.

SSEN Transmission says the new infrastructure will allow up to 220MW of additional renewable generation

to connect. Electricity collected at Finstown will be transmitted to Dounreay and then into the wider northern transmission network.

The link creates commercial opportunity for wind and marine-energy developers, while offering Orkney the possibility of new investment, construction work, community benefit payments and a stronger local energy economy. The extent to which those gains remain in the islands will depend on the ownership of the generating projects that secure connections, the terms agreed with communities and whether local firms gain lasting work beyond the construction period.

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 14 July 2026

Data Centres Abroad are Leaving Scotland a Warning

Read online: <https://modern.scot/data-centres-abroad-are-leaving-scotland-a-warning/>



Communities living beside the world's expanding data-centre industry are reporting contaminated reclaimed water, continuous industrial noise, pressure on electricity systems and rising infrastructure costs. Scotland is still deciding how much of the same development it is prepared to accept.

The cloud has acquired plumbing, cooling towers, substations, generators and an electricity bill of

industrial proportions.

Across several countries, communities are discovering the physical consequences of infrastructure usually described in weightless language. Residents have complained of mechanical noise continuing through the night. Public authorities have asked schools and offices to reduce electricity use as costs rise. Manufacturers have faced severe increases in power charges. A contractor working on a Meta data-centre development contaminated part of a municipal reclaimed-water system with a rare bacterium.

Reports that bees have also been harmed require further investigation. No reliable public evidence examined by Modern Scot has yet established that a named data centre caused a particular bee die-off. It remains entirely possible for the construction and operation of a large industrial campus to harm bees through habitat destruction, chemical exposure, polluted water, dust, artificial light and other recognised environmental pathways.

Scotland should examine what has happened elsewhere before individual planning decisions accumulate into a national industrial policy that no government has openly chosen.

Contaminated reclaimed water in Wyoming

In Cheyenne, Wyoming, a contractor working on Meta's data-centre campus discharged water used to flush cooling-system pipes into the municipal wastewater network.

The discharge was linked to *Cupriavidus gilardii*, a rare bacterium capable of causing serious infection, particularly among people with weakened immune systems. Cheyenne's Board of Public Utilities treated the incident as serious noncompliance, stopped the discharge and changed its rules governing wastewater from data centres.

The contamination did not enter Cheyenne's drinking-water supply. It affected reclaimed water used for irrigation, and no community outbreak has been established. Those distinctions matter. They do not make the incident negligible.

Reclaimed-water operations were disrupted and disinfection was required. Officials decided that wastewater from the flushing of data-centre cooling systems should no longer be accepted through the

ordinary municipal sewer.

The episode exposed a weakness in the language surrounding closed-loop cooling. A system may operate largely within a sealed circuit once commissioned while still producing wastewater during construction, flushing, maintenance, chemical treatment or decommissioning.

Municipal wastewater plants are designed around expected domestic and industrial waste. They may not be equipped to identify or remove every bacterium, glycol, corrosion inhibitor, metal or biocide released from a newly installed industrial cooling system.

For Scotland, the lesson is not that every data centre will contaminate water. It is that planning applications must disclose every expected discharge, including temporary construction and commissioning water, rather than discussing only routine operation after the facility opens.

A promise that a cooling system is closed should not end the questioning. It should begin it.

The noise that does not stop

Residents living near data centres in several American communities have described a continuous mechanical hum that remains audible through the night.

Potential sources include cooling fans, chillers, pumps, transformers, electrical equipment and backup generators. Unlike road traffic or construction, much of the machinery must continue operating because servers require tightly controlled temperatures.

Microsoft is facing a class-action lawsuit concerning alleged noise and light disturbance from its Fairwater data centre in Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin. Residents allege that a pervasive low hum has interfered with sleep and the use of their homes. Microsoft maintains that the facility complies with local rules and says it has introduced sound-reduction measures. The allegations have not been determined by a court.

A widely circulated claim of a constant 64-decibel exposure has not been tied to a sufficiently reliable primary measurement showing where, when and how it was recorded. It should not be presented as settled fact.

A decibel number alone is rarely enough. A proper assessment requires the duration, time of day, distance from the equipment, measurement weighting, previous background level and the presence of tonal or low-frequency sound.

A repetitive low hum can be more disruptive than a similar average level produced by ordinary traffic. Low-frequency noise may also penetrate buildings and be experienced as pressure or vibration. A facility can satisfy a broad daytime limit while continuing to disturb nearby households at night.

Scottish planning authorities should require independent baseline measurements before construction, separate daytime and night-time limits, tonal penalties, low-frequency analysis and continuous monitoring at the nearest homes after operation begins.

The developer should not be permitted to commission the only decisive test of the disturbance created by its own machinery.

Schools and public offices asked to conserve electricity

In Henrico County, Virginia, public employees, including school staff, were asked to reduce unnecessary

electricity consumption after the authority was warned that rates for government buildings and schools would rise by 24.9 per cent from 1 July.

Employees were advised to switch off lights in empty rooms, shut down computers, close blinds and unplug equipment that was not being used. The county expected the rate increase to add around \$5 million to its annual electricity costs. Henrico has 37 operating data centres and further developments planned.

It would be inaccurate to claim that those centres alone caused the entire increase. Electricity prices are affected by fuel, generation, transmission, maintenance, weather and regulatory decisions as well as demand from new industrial users.

The public symbolism remains difficult to overlook. Schools and local services were being asked to search for savings while enormous new commercial electricity loads continued to enter the regional system.

This is the bargain Scotland must examine before it is made. When a hyperscale facility requests hundreds of megawatts, does the developer finance the generation and grid reinforcement needed to serve it, or does the existing public system expand around it?

A data centre may be privately owned. The substations, transmission lines, reserve generation and balancing services required to supply it can nevertheless produce costs for everyone else.

Electricity costs in America's largest grid region

The clearest evidence of energy-cost disruption is emerging from the PJM Interconnection, the electricity market covering all or part of 13 American states and the District of Columbia.

Rapid data-centre expansion has contributed to expectations of sharply rising demand while new generation and transmission projects remain delayed. Manufacturers in affected regions have reported substantial increases in capacity charges.

Reuters found that an Ohio brick manufacturer's monthly capacity charge had risen from approximately \$1,600 to \$12,000, while its total electricity costs increased by around 90 per cent. The experience cannot be applied to every household or company, but it demonstrates what can occur when large new demand is added to a constrained system and the resulting costs are distributed across other users.

During a July heatwave, PJM paid as much as \$28,000 per megawatt during short periods to keep the system balanced. Heat, air-conditioning demand, unavailable generation, transmission constraints and growing industrial loads all contributed.

Data centres do not inevitably make every electricity bill rise. One recent US working paper found that historical data-centre growth between 2015 and 2024 may modestly have reduced average retail rates by spreading fixed costs across a larger volume of electricity sales. Its authors also warned that future supply constraints could reverse that effect.

The central issue is therefore not simply how much electricity a facility consumes. It is whether the grid has spare capacity, how quickly new generation can be built and who pays for the infrastructure required.

Oregon has begun answering that question directly. Its POWER Act requires very large users to bear a greater share of the costs they impose on the system. In July, regulators approved a substantial increase in electricity rates for large industrial consumers served by Portland General Electric while slightly reducing residential rates.

Rising household costs are not merely a law of physics. They are also the consequence of regulatory choices about who pays.

Scotland should settle that question before large connections are granted, not after household bills have absorbed the answer.

Ireland's national warning

Ireland offers the closest comparison for Scotland: a relatively small country that pursued technology investment before fully confronting the cumulative effect on its electricity system.

Data centres accounted for 23 per cent of Ireland's metered electricity consumption in 2025, compared with 28 per cent consumed by all homes. Their use had increased sharply over the previous decade.

The concentration became large enough to alter national energy planning and connection policy. Restrictions were introduced around new connections in the Dublin region, and large prospective users have faced stronger requirements concerning generation and renewable supply.

Campaign groups have estimated that data-centre expansion added hundreds of millions of euros to household electricity costs between 2015 and 2023. That is an advocacy estimate rather than an official audited total and should be treated accordingly. The official consumption figures alone show the scale of the policy problem.

Ireland did not reach nearly a quarter of national metered electricity use through one openly debated decision. The outcome developed through a succession of projects, each of which could be presented as manageable when considered alone.

Scotland is at risk of repeating that sequence.

Backup power brings noise, smoke and emissions

Data centres require an exceptionally reliable electricity supply. When the grid fails or becomes strained, facilities may use batteries, diesel generators or dedicated gas generation.

Backup generators must be tested regularly. Their operation can produce noise, nitrogen oxides, fine particulates and carbon emissions close to surrounding communities.

The rapid growth of AI demand is also encouraging proposals for new gas-fired generation. Some technology companies and utilities argue that gas can provide dependable electricity while renewable and grid projects are built. Environmental groups warn that this risks locking in new fossil-fuel infrastructure for facilities advertised as part of a cleaner digital economy.

Recent research examining more than 400 hyperscale facilities in the United States estimated that their electricity demand remained heavily dependent upon fossil-fuel generation and produced a carbon intensity above the national grid average.

A Scottish planning application should therefore disclose more than the renewable-energy contract attached to ordinary operation. It should identify the size, fuel, operating limits, testing schedule and expected emissions of every backup or dedicated generating unit.

A centre cannot be judged solely by the electricity it claims to buy when conditions are favourable. It must also be judged by what it burns when they are not.

Could data centres harm bees?

Modern Scot has not found a verified chain of evidence proving that a named data centre caused a reported bee die-off.

It would nevertheless be wrong to conclude that such harm is impossible. Data centres are large industrial developments. They can affect bees and other pollinators through several established environmental routes.

Habitat loss

Construction may remove grassland, hedgerows, flowering plants, woodland edges and undisturbed ground used for feeding or nesting.

Many wild bee species nest in soil, banks, hollow stems and dead wood. Ground clearance and excavation can destroy colonies directly. Even a relatively small loss of flower-rich habitat can matter where it breaks the connection between seasonal food sources.

Pesticides, herbicides and biocides

Industrial campuses may use herbicides around fences, substations and roads, or insecticides to control ants, mosquitoes, wasps and other insects.

Bees can be exposed through direct contact, contaminated dust, nectar, pollen and water. Some chemicals kill quickly. Others can impair navigation, immunity, reproduction and foraging at lower concentrations.

Any investigation into a bee loss near a data centre would need a complete record of chemicals used by the operator and every contractor.

Water contamination

Bees collect water to cool their colonies, dilute food and feed larvae. They may drink from puddles, drainage channels, irrigation systems, retention ponds and other shallow sources.

Construction runoff or wastewater containing glycol, salts, metals, biocides, bacteria or other contaminants could expose nearby insects. The Wyoming incident proves that unexpected contamination can occur during the commissioning of cooling equipment, although it does not establish that bees were affected there.

A credible investigation would require testing dead bees, hive material, water, soil and nearby vegetation. Proximity alone would not establish causation.

Dust and combustion pollution

Earthworks, concrete cutting, traffic and generator use can release dust and particulates that settle on flowers and water.

Air pollution can harm insects directly and may also degrade the floral scents bees use to locate food. The effect would depend upon the pollutants, concentrations, exposure period and distance from the site.

Artificial light

Large campuses may use security, perimeter and road lighting throughout the night.

Artificial light is an established ecological disturbance. It changes insect movement, feeding and predator relationships and can alter interactions between nocturnal pollinators and plants. Honeybees are principally active by day, but many other pollinating insects operate at dusk or overnight.

Heat, drainage and water demand

Large roofs, roads and paved surfaces can alter drainage and create local heat-island effects. Cooling systems may reject heat, while substantial water withdrawals can affect nearby streams, wetlands or groundwater.

Changes in temperature and soil moisture can shorten flowering periods or reduce the availability of forage during dry weather.

Noise and vibration

Bees use vibration to communicate within the colony. Heavy construction, piling and machinery could plausibly disturb hives close to a development.

Evidence that ordinary operational data-centre noise causes population-level bee decline remains insufficient. This should be treated as a legitimate subject for measurement, not presented as a proven explanation.

The responsible conclusion is that a data centre could harm bees through habitat destruction, chemicals, contaminated water, pollution, artificial light, heat and possibly vibration. None of those mechanisms proves that a particular centre caused a particular death event.

Where bee losses are reported, independent environmental testing is required. Corporate reassurance is not evidence. Neither is immediate certainty from opponents.

The public purpose is rarely defined

Data centres support services used throughout modern life: banking, medical records, communications, government systems, websites, email, cloud storage and emergency infrastructure.

That does not mean every proposed centre has equal public value.

A facility supporting hospital records is not the same proposition as a vast campus intended to train commercial AI systems, optimise advertising or provide speculative future computing capacity. Both may be called data centres, but the common label obscures the difference.

The public is rarely told what activity will take place inside, whose data will be processed, what proportion of the capacity will serve AI, how many permanent jobs will remain, what tax advantages will be received or whether the electricity could support another form of industry.

These buildings may also support systems of identification, behavioural analysis, surveillance and automated decision-making. Describing them as digital jails is a political judgement, but the concern beneath the phrase is legitimate. Computing infrastructure is not neutral merely because its machinery is hidden behind blank walls.

The question is not whether Scotland should eliminate every server room. It is whether multinational companies should receive priority access to Scottish electricity, water, land and public infrastructure without proving a commensurate public return.

Scotland is still in time to ask

The First Minister has said the Scottish Government is considering national planning guidance for hyperscale data centres while applications are already progressing through local authorities.

Scotland should not allow every council to assess a large electricity demand as though no other application existed. The cumulative national requirement must be understood before a succession of individual approvals commits the country's future capacity.

Every hyperscale application should disclose expected and maximum electricity demand, annual and peak water use, all wastewater, backup generation, continuous and low-frequency noise, exterior lighting, chemical use, permanent employment, tax support and the full cost of grid reinforcement.

Independent monitoring should begin before construction so later changes in noise, water, air quality and ecology can be measured against a genuine baseline.

Developers should also be required to finance bonds covering contamination, abandonment and restoration. A proposed wildflower meadow beside a fenced industrial campus is no substitute for legal and financial liability.

The international evidence does not establish that every data centre will poison water, kill bees or double electricity bills. It establishes something more useful: these developments can produce identifiable environmental and economic harms, and several forms of disruption have already appeared in communities told that the facilities could readily be accommodated.

Scotland is being offered the same bargain before its complete terms have been disclosed.

The cloud is not floating above us. It is arriving as an industrial estate, asking for a substation, a water supply, reserve generation and a permanent place in the landscape.

Before Scotland provides them, the public is entitled to know what, precisely, it receives in return.

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ENERGY | 14 July 2026

Eight Energy Decisions Scotland Cannot Afford to Ignore

Read online: <https://modern.scot/eight-energy-decisions-scotland-must-watch-next-and-why/>



From grid connections and pumped storage to North Sea consent and household bills, decisions now approaching will determine whether Scotland builds an energy economy of its own or merely hosts infrastructure controlled elsewhere.

Scotland has 1,236 renewable energy and storage projects in its planning pipeline, with a combined estimated capacity of 85.4 gigawatts. That figure demonstrates the scale of developer interest, but it does not tell us which projects will be connected,

financed or built. Nor does it establish how much of the resulting industry, income and employment will remain in Scotland.

Over the coming months, regulators, governments and the National Energy System Operator will make decisions affecting electricity storage, North Sea production, household prices and access to the grid. Some deadlines are fixed. Others remain inconveniently vague while live planning applications and commercial commitments continue to advance.

The central test is straightforward: who owns the assets, who receives the income, who pays for the network, where the industrial work is carried out and what remains in Scotland after the electricity leaves.

1. Already under way: Scotland's largest projects receive their grid verdicts

The National Energy System Operator is issuing new grid-connection offers under its reformed Gate 2 process. Scotland is the first part of Great Britain in which offers are being issued.

Gate 2 phase-one offers for transmission-connected and large embedded projects are due between mid-May and mid-September 2026. Gate 2 projects can receive a confirmed connection date, connection point and place in the queue. Projects that remain at Gate 1 receive no confirmed date, although they may seek to qualify through a future application window.

These decisions will separate Scotland's plausible energy projects from the much larger collection of proposals that look impressive in planning statistics but may have no workable route to the network.

The consequences extend beyond individual developers. The Port of Cromarty Firth has been awarded £55.7 million of UK Government support for expansion intended to serve floating offshore wind, with further investment required before the proposed facilities become operational. If the projects expected to use such infrastructure are delayed or excluded from the grid, port expenditure and supply-chain plans can be left without sufficient demand.

The Scottish Government should seek and publish a national assessment of the offers as they arrive. The public should not be expected to reconstruct Scotland's industrial outlook from a series of unrelated company announcements.

Pay attention to: revised connection dates, reduced capacities, abandoned developments and statements blaming unspecified "market conditions". The connection offer may be the real reason a project advances or disappears.

2. 7 August: the storage settlement that could place private risk on public bills

Ofgem's consultation on the first long-duration electricity-storage awards closes on 7 August 2026.

The regulator has provisionally selected 16 projects with a combined capacity of 7,645 megawatts for possible support through a cap-and-floor revenue system. Seven are in northern Scotland, including the proposed Coire Glas, Earba and Loch Kemp pumped-storage schemes and four large battery projects. Final awards are expected in autumn 2026.

Scotland needs more storage. It would allow surplus renewable electricity to be held when generation is high and released when demand rises or wind output falls. It could also reduce the need to pay renewable generators to switch off when the network cannot carry their electricity.

The financial mechanism requires close examination. Under the proposed arrangement, consumers would make up some of the difference when a supported project's revenue falls below its agreed floor. When revenues exceed the cap, money would be returned to consumers. Ofgem says direct effects on bills are expected to be broadly neutral over time, with wider savings produced through reduced system costs. That outcome depends upon the final financial terms and the projects being delivered competently.

Scotland could gain valuable storage while retaining little ownership of the assets. Consumers could help guarantee private revenues while Highland communities host dams, tunnels, reservoirs, roads, substations and transmission works.

Pay attention to: the final revenue floors, protection against overruns, delivery conditions, Scottish procurement, community benefit and whether public financial support produces any public or community ownership.

3. 10 August: the Jackdaw consultation closes

The latest public consultation on the Jackdaw gas-field development closes on 10 August 2026.

The field remains under review. The UK Government requested further environmental information in March, received the developer's response on 19 June and opened the latest consultation on 8 July.

The earlier consent decisions for Jackdaw and Rosebank were overturned by the Court of Session in January 2025 because the environmental assessments had not properly considered the emissions that would result when the extracted oil and gas were eventually burned. Development work was allowed to continue at commercial risk, but extraction cannot begin without new consent.

The danger to Scotland runs in both directions.

Approval could prolong dependence upon a declining oil and gas industry without ensuring that replacement

industries will be ready when production falls. A weak or legally vulnerable decision could also bring another court challenge, extending uncertainty for workers and suppliers.

Refusal would not create replacement employment. Aberdeen and the north-east could lose skilled work and supply-chain activity before offshore wind, decommissioning, carbon capture or other industries are able to absorb the workforce.

Approval is not an energy transition. Refusal is not an employment strategy. Any decision must be accompanied by a credible account of what happens to the workforce under either outcome.

Pay attention to: how downstream emissions are assessed, the evidence behind employment claims, the likely destination and pricing of the gas, the risk of further litigation and the specific replacement work available to affected Scottish workers.

4. 26 August: the autumn household price cap is announced

Ofgem is due to announce the price cap covering October to December on 26 August 2026.

The present cap rose by 13 per cent on 1 July, taking the illustrative annual bill for a typical direct-debit household to £1,862. Electricity increased to an average of 26.11 pence per kilowatt hour and gas to 7.33 pence. Actual bills depend upon consumption, payment method and region; the cap is not a maximum household bill.

Scottish Government modelling estimates that around 800,000 Scottish households could be in fuel poverty between July and September, equivalent to 31 per cent of all households. Approximately 420,000 could be in extreme fuel poverty. These are modelled estimates rather than recorded household outcomes, but they show the scale of exposure before colder weather returns.

Rural and island households often have higher heating requirements, fewer alternatives and homes that are more expensive to improve. National averages can conceal much harsher local circumstances.

The deeper danger is the widening separation between energy production and energy affordability. Scotland can generate large quantities of renewable electricity while people living beside the turbines, reservoirs and transmission lines receive no automatic local price advantage.

Consent for further infrastructure will become harder to maintain if Scotland's expanding energy estate remains invisible in household bills.

Pay attention to: Scottish regional unit rates and standing charges, the January price forecast, rural and island effects and whether governments propose structural change rather than another temporary payment scheme.

5. By mid-September: the first major connection results become visible

By mid-September, NESO and the transmission owners expect to have issued the first phase of Gate 2 offers for transmission-connected and large embedded projects. The process will reveal which Scottish wind farms, storage schemes and major energy users have obtained firm positions in the reformed queue.

Connections reform is intended to remove speculative developments from a GB queue that had grown to more than 738 gigawatts, far beyond the capacity required for the UK Government's 2030 clean-power plans.

Projects must now demonstrate readiness and alignment with national strategic requirements.

The danger lies in who defines strategic value. A project may be useful to a Scottish port, council area or manufacturing base without ranking highly under a GB-wide electricity plan. Scottish floating-wind projects may also require longer development periods because ports, grid connections, supply chains and offshore technology must be assembled together.

The queue is therefore doing more than organising engineering work. It is making economic choices about which industries and regions are allowed to proceed.

Pay attention to: whether Scottish projects receive later dates than expected, whether large projects reduce their proposed capacity and whether employment-intensive developments lose out to schemes offering much less permanent Scottish work.

6. By mid-November: local businesses and community projects learn where they stand

Gate 2 phase-one distribution offers are scheduled to continue until mid-November 2026. These decisions may receive less national attention but could affect smaller generators, community-energy schemes, batteries, housing developments and local businesses seeking additional power. Phase-two decisions will continue into 2027.

Their cumulative effect could be substantial. A manufacturer unable to obtain additional capacity may expand elsewhere. A community-energy project can become commercially impossible. New housing can be delayed by local network constraints. An energy-intensive development may receive a connection while another project offering more employment waits.

This does not mean that Scotland has one simple pool of electricity in which every connection directly removes another. Capacity depends upon location, voltage, timing and the reinforcement required. It does mean that poorly coordinated decisions can favour developments capable of navigating the connection process rather than those offering the greatest public return.

Pay attention to: regional differences, the type of demand being approved, local businesses unable to expand, delayed community schemes and whether developers are paying the full cost of the network work they require.

7. Early 2027: Scotland gets its first proper view of Britain's spatial energy plan

NESO's draft Strategic Spatial Energy Plan and accompanying environmental report are due to enter public consultation in early 2027.

The plan will map broad zones, technologies, capacity and timing for electricity and hydrogen generation and storage across Great Britain between 2030 and 2050. It will not select individual projects, but it will influence future investment, network planning and the strategic assumptions against which projects are judged.

NESO says the plan will be optimised for cost across demand and high-level network needs while also considering environmental, societal and other spatial interests. The Scottish, Welsh and UK governments jointly commissioned the work.

The danger is that a plan optimised across Great Britain may not maximise Scottish employment,

manufacturing or ownership. Floating offshore wind in Scottish waters may appear more expensive than fixed-bottom projects closer to large southern demand centres once transmission and technology costs are included.

Scotland could lose port development, fabrication, maintenance work and supply-chain expertise if too little Scottish offshore capacity is included. It could also receive extensive generation and transmission infrastructure while the equipment is imported and the assets are owned elsewhere.

Scotland can therefore lose by being excluded or by being included on poor terms.

Pay attention to: the assumptions used for transmission costs, the treatment of floating wind, whether Scottish industrial effects are measured and whether jobs, ownership and manufacturing are considered alongside the lowest theoretical GB system cost.

8. Date unknown: Scotland awaits decisions on data centres and its own energy strategy

Two of the most consequential Scottish decisions have no published deadline.

On 25 June, the First Minister said the Scottish Government was giving active consideration to national planning guidance for hyperscale data centres and would treat the work as a priority. He acknowledged concerns about the effect of multiple applications on energy resources and climate objectives. Fife and Edinburgh were cited in Parliament as councils seeking greater clarity while live proposals were being considered.

The danger is that applications are determined separately before Scotland establishes their cumulative electricity, water, network and environmental effects. A data centre may be useful where it can consume otherwise constrained renewable generation and reduce demand at system peaks. An inflexible centre in the wrong location may require costly reinforcement while producing relatively few permanent jobs.

Scotland also remains without a final Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan. The Scottish Government's current policy page still refers to the draft published in January 2023 and says that subsequent UK policy developments, the creation of NESO and recent court decisions are informing its position. No publication date is given.

The absence has become harder to defend. Connections are being allocated, storage is moving towards regulated support, North Sea fields are under review and planning authorities are considering very large new sources of electricity demand.

Scotland risks publishing its strategy after the structure of the energy system has already been decided by regulators, UK institutions and private companies.

Pay attention to: a firm publication timetable, cumulative data-centre demand, enforceable supply-chain requirements, public and community ownership, household affordability and a clear hierarchy for housing, heat, transport, manufacturing, exports, hydrogen and digital infrastructure.

What Scotland should ask before every decision

These events will often be reported separately: a consultation closes, a connection offer arrives, a price cap changes or a developer withdraws a proposal. Scotland should read them as parts of one system.

The country possesses extensive renewable resources, seabed, natural storage geography and a skilled energy workforce. It does not exercise complete control over electricity markets, transmission pricing, grid connections, offshore production consent or Britain's strategic energy planning.

That imbalance creates the possibility of an extraordinary national failure. Scotland could become covered in energy infrastructure while remaining burdened by high household bills, limited domestic ownership, imported equipment and insecure employment.

The questions before every project and policy decision should therefore remain the same.

Who owns it? Who pays for it? Who works on it? Who receives the income? What remains in Scotland when the power leaves?

Without satisfactory answers, an energy development may be situated in Scotland without belonging meaningfully to Scotland at all.

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ECONOMY | 13 July 2026

No Scottish Boat Won a Tuna Licence. Twenty-Nine English Boats Can Fish Scottish Waters

Read online: <https://modern.scot/no-scottish-boat-won-a-tuna-licence-twenty-nine-english-boats-can-fish-scottish-waters/>



A brief exchange in the House of Commons exposed an awkward fact about one of Britain's newest commercial fisheries.

Torcuil Crichton, the Labour MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, asked why Angus Campbell, a fisherman from Harris who held Scotland's only commercial bluefin tuna authorisation in 2025, had been refused one for 2026. Campbell had invested in specialist equipment and established a route to market for tuna caught west of the Hebrides. Two applications were submitted from

Scotland this year. Neither succeeded.

The final allocation went to 29 vessels administered in England and one from Jersey. None went to Scotland, Wales or Guernsey. Those successful vessels are permitted to target bluefin tuna throughout English, Welsh and Scottish waters. No Scottish-licensed vessel has the same permission.

The precise wording matters. These are not "English licences for Scottish waters" in the conventional sense. They are UK commercial bluefin tuna authorisations attached to vessels licensed through the different fisheries administrations. Yet the practical result is exactly as described: vessels based in English ports may catch and land bluefin tuna found in Scottish waters, while no vessel licensed in Scotland may target them commercially during the 2026 season.

The Marine Management Organisation received 155 applications for 30 authorisations. England accounted for 133 applications, Wales ten, Jersey six, Guernsey four and Scotland two.

Before assessment, the MMO removed information identifying the applicants, vessels and their locations. A panel then examined each application against eight pass-or-fail questions covering fish welfare, equipment, handling, quota management, experience and the economic and social benefits proposed for coastal communities.

Sixty-six applications passed. Of those, 63 were administered in England and three in Jersey. Both Scottish applications were rejected before the random ballot took place. The final ballot awarded 29 authorisations to England and one to Jersey.

This was therefore not simply a case of two Scottish fishermen being unlucky in a draw. Neither was allowed into it.

The published documents do not disclose why the Scottish applications failed. Without the applications, panel notes or individual reasons, it is impossible to determine whether the assessment was correct. An

established fishing history cannot automatically entitle an applicant to a scarce public resource, and previous participation does not prove that every section of a later application met the stated requirements.

The Government's position is that the process was fair and transparent. Fisheries Minister Stephen Morgan told the Commons that authorisations last for one year, do not renew automatically and provide no guarantee of future quota. He said officials would continue working with Scotland and the other fisheries administrations to gather evidence about the approach.

That answer explains the rules. It does not resolve the question raised by the outcome.

The application process specifically required fishermen to demonstrate benefits to coastal communities. Applicants had to identify at least five benefits connected with employment, income, skills, supply chains or community value. At the same time, the assessors were prevented from knowing where the applicant or vessel was based.

Anonymisation can protect applicants against favouritism. It also prevents the panel from considering whether the national distribution of licences bears any relationship to the waters in which the fish are found or the communities expected to benefit. There was no Scottish allocation, regional minimum or geographical weighting. Once applicants passed the first stage, the final decision was made by random ballot.

The system was designed so that every authorisation could, in principle, be concentrated in one part of the country. Its first full result came close.

There is also a question for the Scottish Government. The MMO's published report says that all UK fisheries administrations were invited to participate in the assessment panel, but only England and Jersey provided representatives. The public document does not explain why Scotland was absent. The application process was designed and run by the MMO on behalf of the UK Government, but Scottish ministers cannot be treated as wholly detached from an arrangement in which their fisheries administration was invited to take part.

Bluefin tuna have returned to British waters after decades of depletion. The UK's annual international quota has risen from roughly 66 tonnes in 2025 to 230.56 tonnes for each year from 2026 to 2028. Of the 2026 allocation, 120 tonnes have been assigned to the commercial rod-and-reel fishery. Thirty vessels may land up to four tonnes each between 13 July and 31 December.

The remaining quota is not simply an unused stock that can automatically be handed to another fleet. The UK fishing plan reserves amounts for accidental commercial bycatch, estimated mortality from recreational catch-and-release fishing, scientific work and tagging programmes. Crichton nevertheless asked ministers to consider a further licensing round or another means of providing access from the quota not assigned to the present commercial authorisations. The minister did not commit to one.

The economic opportunity is real. An evaluation commissioned for Defra estimated that the 2024 commercial bluefin fishery produced £392,007 in direct economic activity and £713,000 when indirect effects were included. The report concluded that investment in boats, processing, markets and coastal supply chains could increase the value considerably as the fishery develops.

For a remote island community, one authorisation can support more than the vessel that holds it. Tuna must be landed, handled, cooled, transported and sold. A developing Hebridean fishery could create work around ports, merchants, tourism, specialist angling and export. These are precisely the benefits the application form asked fishermen to describe.

A regional allocation should not be awarded merely because a vessel is Scottish. Applicants must be capable,

safe and commercially prepared. Nor should an English vessel be excluded from a UK fishery simply because it is registered in England.

The unresolved issue is whether a UK-wide public resource should be distributed through a process that takes no account of regional access after the minimum criteria have been met. A ballot may be procedurally neutral while producing an outcome that leaves the communities nearest an emerging fishery without any commercial participation.

The Government has established that Campbell had no automatic right to retain his authorisation. It has not explained why demonstrated experience counted for no more than a first-time application, why neither Scottish bid met the pass standard, why Scotland supplied no representative to the assessment panel, or why no safeguard existed against the entire Scottish fleet being excluded.

For 2026, the position is plain. Bluefin tuna may be caught commercially in Scottish waters, but not by a single Scottish-licensed vessel.

The process may have followed its rules. The rules still require an explanation.

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COMMUNITY | 13 July 2026

Glasgow's Anger Did Not Begin With an Online Rumour

Read online: <https://modern.scot/glasgows-anger-did-not-begin-with-an-online-rumour/>



A 16-year-old girl was seriously sexually assaulted in Springburn Park on the evening of 26 June. Police Scotland later arrested and charged a 36-year-old man in connection with the attack. He appeared at Glasgow Sheriff Court on 6 July, made no plea and was remanded in custody. He was expected to return to court within eight days.

That was not an online invention. It was not a misunderstanding created by social media or an abstract argument about immigration. A girl was attacked in a public park, and people living in the surrounding community were entitled to be angry.

Protests and disturbances subsequently spread through parts of Glasgow, including Royston, Cranhill and Castlemilk. Some gatherings followed genuine criminal allegations. Others were directed towards addresses circulated online without adequate verification. Police said an innocent person was targeted through mistaken identity in Castlemilk. Five officers were injured across three disturbances, and arrests were made over alleged attacks on police.

Violence against officers, threats towards innocent residents and the publication of unverified private addresses cannot be defended as lawful protest. A crowd cannot determine guilt, and a person's appearance, name or presumed nationality cannot substitute for evidence.

It would be equally dishonest, however, to describe Glasgow's anger principally as a product of misinformation or racism. The anger is rooted in a documented rise in sexual violence and a growing belief that the institutions responsible for public protection are not providing either safety or a complete account of what is happening.

Scotland recorded 16,430 sexual crimes in 2025–26. At least 32 per cent involved a victim under 18. Recorded rape and attempted rape rose by 11 per cent in one year, from 2,897 to 3,229, and by 72 per cent over ten years. The total is now at its highest recorded level since 1971. Of the offences recorded under the current sexual-offences legislation, 95 per cent had female victims.

The figure must be stated accurately. It does not mean that 32 per cent of girls in Glasgow have been raped, nor is it a Glasgow-only measure. It means that at least 32 per cent of all sexual crimes recorded across Scotland involved someone under 18. The Scottish Government says that the precise age of the victim cannot generally be established from the national data supplied by Police Scotland.

The Glasgow figures that are available are grim enough without exaggeration. A Police Scotland freedom-of-information disclosure recorded 478 rape or rape-related crimes in Greater Glasgow during 2025. Of those, 116 were detected, meaning that an accused had been identified and police considered there to be sufficient evidence for possible criminal proceedings.

Within the core rape classifications, the table recorded 380 rapes involving female victims aged 16 or over, 30

involving girls aged 13 to 15 and 21 involving girls under 13. It separately recorded two further assault-with-rape offences involving girls under 16. These are recorded crimes, not population percentages, and a detected offence is not the same as a conviction. They nevertheless provide a clearer picture than the vague national language usually offered when public concern reaches boiling point.

The wider rise in rape cannot honestly be attributed entirely to immigration. Scottish Police Authority analysis found that more than half of reported rape crimes had a domestic element, commonly involving a partner or former partner. Recent rapes remained the largest category, while rape of women aged over 16 had risen by 41.8 per cent between 2019–20 and 2024–25. Sexual violence in Scotland is therefore broader than stranger attacks or offending by recent arrivals.

That wider truth does not remove the public's right to ask about crimes committed by foreign nationals, asylum seekers or people without lawful immigration status. Those are legitimate questions, particularly when particular cases have become linked to migration and when communities believe that information is being withheld.

Police Scotland's 2025 Glasgow disclosure listed 43 accused records as British and 12 under identified non-British nationalities. In 62 cases, nationality was not recorded or was listed as unknown. More than half of the entries therefore supplied no usable nationality information.

A separate disclosure concerning rape accusations in Greater Glasgow during 2024 recorded accused people across several ethnic categories, including White Scottish, Other White British, Asian, African and other groups, with 28 records lacking ethnicity. That table cannot establish immigration status, and neither disclosure links the accused person's nationality or ethnicity to the victim's ethnicity.

The claim that official figures prove an increase in rape by immigrants against white women cannot presently be substantiated from Scotland's published data. The necessary linked information is not routinely published. That does not prove the concern is imaginary. It shows that government has failed to collect or release the information needed to test it properly.

Ethnicity, nationality and immigration status are not interchangeable. A foreign national may have lived lawfully in Britain for decades. An asylum applicant is not automatically in the country illegally. A British citizen may belong to any ethnic group. Public debate becomes less truthful when these categories are collapsed into one another, but it also becomes less truthful when officials use statistical deficiencies to avoid answering legitimate questions.

The Scottish Government acknowledged in a 2025 freedom-of-information response that it held no information on recorded offences committed by people without legal immigration status after arriving in Scotland. It also held no information about such individuals' criminal convictions in their countries of origin.

That is an institutional failure shared across government.

Immigration, asylum, border control and removal are reserved to the UK Government. Policing, justice, health, education, housing and social services are largely devolved. Glasgow City Council has responsibilities involving child protection, social work, schools, community safety, public spaces and support for people affected by violence. The powers are divided between institutions, but a girl walking through a Glasgow park does not experience public administration in constitutional compartments. She experiences whether she is safe.

The UK Government is responsible for knowing who has entered the country, on what legal basis, whether identity and security checks have been completed, and what happens when a foreign national is convicted of a

serious crime. It should provide Scottish authorities with reliable immigration-status information and explain clearly when deportation is legally available, pursued, delayed or prevented.

The Scottish Government cannot respond to every question about offender nationality by observing that immigration is reserved. Policing, criminal-justice policy, victim services and the quality of Scottish crime data sit within devolved government. It should be possible to publish annual figures distinguishing accused people from convicted offenders, nationality from immigration status, and recent arrivals from long-established residents, while preserving the identities of victims and respecting due process.

Glasgow City Council cannot police the border or direct criminal prosecutions. It can be judged on local safeguarding, social-work capacity, school protection, lighting and maintenance of public spaces, support for victims, community communication and whether credible concerns are addressed before rumours take their place.

The contrast with the political energy devoted to online child safety is difficult to ignore. The UK Government has announced that children under 16 will be prevented from using certain social-media services from spring 2027. Platforms will be expected to operate stronger age-assurance systems, while livestreaming and communication with strangers will be restricted for older teenagers. Ministers have presented the programme as decisive action to protect childhood.

Online exploitation, abuse and manipulation are real and require intervention. Children do not, however, exist only online. They also inhabit parks, streets, schools, buses, housing estates and town centres.

Government appears capable of designing a national system intended to verify the age of every child attempting to access a social-media platform. Yet the public cannot obtain a routine Glasgow table showing how many girls under 16 were raped or seriously sexually assaulted, how many cases led to charges, how many reached court, how long proceedings took, how many accused were repeat offenders, or what immigration action followed a conviction where relevant.

There is no comparable ministerial timetable promising that girls will be safer in public places by spring 2027. There is no equivalent national announcement explaining what measurable reduction in rape will be achieved, who will be accountable if it is missed, or what immediate intervention follows when the figures continue to rise.

It would be wrong to claim that police officers, social workers, health professionals and specialist charities have no interest in protecting girls. Many work daily with victims in distressing circumstances. The failure lies at the level of political priority, institutional coordination, resources, transparency and measurable outcomes.

The answer is not to abandon online protection. It is to apply the same determination to the physical world.

Lawful protest remains part of a free society. Glasgow residents have the right to demand safer streets, stronger policing, honest immigration information and effective action against sexual offenders. That right does not extend to attacking officers, intimidating families or deciding guilt through social-media speculation.

Government also has obligations. It cannot use the existence of false rumours to dismiss the genuine crimes that preceded them. A mistaken address does not make the underlying sexual violence imaginary. The presence of racists at a gathering does not mean that every parent asking why girls are unsafe is motivated by race.

Women and girls must not become incidental figures in a political contest over immigration. Their protection must not depend on whether an offender belongs to a category that one side wishes to emphasise or another

wishes to avoid.

The standard should remain the same: investigate serious allegations promptly, prosecute where the evidence permits, remove dangerous offenders from the public, deport foreign offenders where the law provides for it, publish honest information and protect innocent people from collective blame.

Glasgow's anger did not begin with an online rumour. It began with women and girls being attacked, with recorded rape reaching its highest level in more than half a century, and with institutions that still cannot provide the public with a complete account of who is offending, what happens afterwards and why the numbers continue to rise.

A government that promises to protect children from strangers online must show equal resolve when the danger is waiting in a park.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 11 July 2026

Argyll's Islands May Become Scotland's Next Short-Term-Let Control Zone

Read online: <https://modern.scot/argylls-islands-may-become-scotlands-next-short-term-let-control-zone/>



Argyll and Bute Council is preparing to consult on planning controls that could change how houses are converted into holiday accommodation across some of Scotland's most tourism-dependent island and coastal communities.

The proposed short-term-let control area would cover four housing market areas: Mull and Iona; Coll and Tiree; Islay, Jura and Colonsay; and Lorn and the Inner Isles. Councillors approved the consultation in June, but the council must return with the results and final

recommendations before any designation can proceed. Scottish ministers would also have to approve the control area.

This would not ban holiday accommodation.

It would mean that changing a dwelling house into a short-term let would automatically be treated as a material change of use requiring planning permission. The council could then refuse permission where the economic benefit of the proposed holiday let did not outweigh the loss of a home from the residential market.

The policy is intended primarily to control secondary letting: the permanent use of an entire dwelling as visitor accommodation. Home sharing and the temporary letting of someone's main home would generally be supported under the council's proposed policy. Purpose-built or unconventional accommodation such as pods and yurts would not be caught by the control area rules because they are not dwelling houses being removed from residential use.

The argument is about how many ordinary houses can be removed from permanent occupation before tourism begins to weaken the communities on which it depends.

The figures show a housing system under pressure

Argyll and Bute declared a housing emergency in 2023. The council says second homes, long-term empty properties and secondary short-term lets together account for around 15% of the authority's total housing stock.

That council-wide figure conceals much sharper local pressures. In the proposed control areas, the proportion of homes not being used as a principal residence is estimated at 30% in Mull and Iona, 42% in Coll and Tiree, 30% in Islay, Jura and Colonsay, and 15% in Lorn and the Inner Isles.

By February 2026, Argyll and Bute Council had approved 3,270 short-term-let licences. About 2,900 were for secondary letting, meaning the use of a whole property that could otherwise serve as someone's permanent home. The four proposed control areas contain 1,486 of those secondary lets. Lorn and the Inner Isles has the

largest number, at 663, although the island areas carry a greater concentration relative to their much smaller housing stocks.

Earlier council data recorded 426 short-term-let licence applications in Mull and Iona, 97 in Coll and Tiree, 282 in Islay, Jura and Colonsay, and 817 in Lorn. The figures include different forms of letting and cannot be treated as a simple count of houses lost to permanent occupation, but they show the weight of visitor accommodation within the local housing system.

The pressure is not confined to holiday lets. Second homes and long-term empty properties also remove housing from everyday use. A control area can regulate future short-term letting, but it cannot by itself turn every second home, vacant property or lawful long-established holiday cottage into a permanent residence.

The four areas do not face exactly the same problem

The council has chosen housing market areas rather than individual villages or islands as the proposed geography. A housing market area is intended to represent a place within which most people make their housing choices. Argyll and Bute is unusually dispersed, and the council divides it into nine such areas.

The figures nevertheless show substantial differences within the four proposed areas.

Coll and Tiree has the most acute headline measure: 42% of its housing stock is not being used as a principal home. Its private rented sector represented only 4.6% of housing in 2025, down from 6.7% in 2022. The median house price in 2024 was £250,000, equivalent to 6.2 times the median local income. Around 67% of property sales went to purchasers from outside Argyll and Bute.

Mull and Iona has a lower but still severe 30% ineffective stock rate. There were nine applicants for every new social tenancy in 2025, the highest pressure ratio among the four proposed areas. The private rented share fell from 12.8% in 2022 to 10.4% in 2025, while 55% of house sales went to purchasers from outside the council area.

Islay, Jura and Colonsay also records 30% of housing outside principal occupation. Its median house price was six times the median local income, while the private rented share declined from 10.2% in 2022 to 9% in 2025.

Lorn and the Inner Isles is different again. Its proportion of ineffective stock is lower, at 15%, but it contains the largest absolute number of secondary short-term lets. Its private rented sector fell particularly sharply, from 13.8% of housing in 2022 to 7.9% in 2025. There were seven applicants for every new social tenancy.

The shortage is already affecting jobs and public services

The most persuasive case for intervention is not found in house-price figures alone.

Council-commissioned and community research has repeatedly found that island employers struggle to recruit and retain workers because accommodation cannot be found. Some businesses operate with vacancies or reduced capacity. Others rent homes themselves and sublet them to employees, removing further properties from the open market. Investment and expansion have reportedly been postponed because staff cannot be housed.

The same problem affects schools, health and social care, fire services and policing. The council and the Health and Social Care Partnership have already used public funds to bring properties back into use for essential

workers. Community organisations on Gigha, Colonsay and Mull have had to develop housing themselves to protect jobs, population and local facilities.

Control would not rapidly release every holiday let

The council's report is more ambitious than merely preventing new conversions. It proposes using the planning and licensing systems together to examine some existing short-term lets when their three-year licences come up for renewal.

Where an existing secondary let has operated for fewer than ten years, lacks planning permission or a certificate of lawful use, and is judged to involve a material change of use, the council could require a planning application. Permission could then be refused under National Planning Framework 4, potentially leading to the licence being revoked.

This would be decided property by property.

Many existing holiday lets will have operated for more than ten years and may already be lawful. Others have planning permission or will not be judged to have undergone a material change of use. The council acknowledges that it cannot yet say how many houses would actually return to permanent occupation.

Its illustrative figure is modest but significant: 10% of renewals within the proposed area would amount to about 140 homes. The council estimates that constructing the same number of island houses would cost approximately £42m at 2026–27 prices.

That comparison should be treated carefully. A former holiday let returning to the market does not automatically become affordable, available for long-term rent or purchased by a local resident. It could be sold as a second home, remain empty or command a price beyond local incomes.

Planning control can preserve residential use. It cannot guarantee affordability.

Tourism businesses have a legitimate concern

Self-catering accommodation is part of Argyll and Bute's visitor economy, particularly where hotel and guest-house capacity is limited.

The council acknowledges that short-term lets generate spending in transport, food, retail, leisure and cultural activity. It cites industry-commissioned research estimating that a secondary short-term let in Argyll and Bute supports annual gross value added of £32,051 and 0.8 jobs, compared with £11,810 and 0.1 jobs for a property in residential use. The council argues that those figures do not capture the wider value of maintaining population, housing workers and sustaining year-round services.

The Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers has challenged the council's case, arguing that the consultation must test whether control areas elsewhere have produced measurable housing gains and must distinguish working tourism businesses from second homes and empty properties. It also warns of the cumulative effect of licensing, planning controls and other visitor-economy charges.

That criticism cannot be dismissed as simple industry resistance.

A locally owned cottage business may support a family income, cleaners, maintenance contractors and year-round spending. Removing accommodation in places with limited hotels or ferries can reduce visitor capacity rather than redistribute it. Small operators may also be less able than large tourism businesses to absorb planning fees, professional advice and uncertainty.

The council's own paper does not provide a full place-by-place inventory of hotels, guest houses, bed-and-breakfast rooms or purpose-built visitor accommodation. Nor does it demonstrate how many visitors could be absorbed elsewhere if residential short-term lets decline.

That evidence should be produced before final boundaries are approved.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 11 July 2026

The Highlands Are Being Redrawn Before the Public Can Object

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-highlands-are-being-redrawn-before-the-public-can-object/>



More than 230 distinct development bids have been placed before Highland Council, including proposals for about 21,600 homes. Modern Scot's analysis finds extensive farmland conversion, concentrated developer interests and no complete public account of the jobs, schools, health care, water and transport needed to support the growth.

Hundreds of parcels of Highland land have been put forward for housing, industry, energy infrastructure, tourism and commercial development as Highland

Council begins drawing the planning map that could govern the region for the next generation.

The council has opened a public Call for Ideas, inviting residents, community organisations and businesses to say how land and buildings should be used, protected, improved or developed. The exercise closes on 18 September 2026.

This is not yet the formal consultation on the individual sites already submitted by landowners and developers.

Residents can place their own priorities into the process, but they cannot yet lodge a statutory objection to a particular development bid. Highland Council says the submitted sites will be assessed before preferred locations are selected. Those chosen for the proposed plan will then be subject to formal consultation and objection.

The public is therefore being asked to contribute before it knows which land the council will eventually favour.

That sequence follows changes to Scotland's planning system. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced a new process for local development plans, while National Planning Framework 4 became part of Scotland's statutory development plan in 2023. Councils are now required to prepare new ten-year plans supported by an Evidence Report, an independent gate check, a proposed plan and formal examination.

Highland Council intends to replace four existing council-prepared plans with one Highland Local Development Plan covering almost the entire council area outside the Cairngorms National Park.

The current plans remain legally in force until the replacement is adopted, which is expected around 2029. No final development map has yet been approved.

What has already happened is the evidence-gathering and land-promotion stage.

Between January and May 2025, Highland Council invited landowners, developers, public bodies and

communities to submit possible sites for housing, industry and mixed development. More than 250 submissions were received. Officers then assembled an Evidence Report, consulted public agencies and considered registered Local Place Plans.

Councillors approved the Evidence Report in June 2026 and submitted it for the statutory gate-check process.

That was not approval of the individual development sites.

It did, however, place landowners, housebuilders, estates, public bodies and planning consultants several steps ahead of most residents. They have already identified land, stated preferred uses and, in some cases, secured control through ownership or option agreements.

The public is only now being asked to place its own priorities beside them.

What Modern Scot found in the data

The public map contains 279 mapped features across 44 settlement groups.

Modern Scot's analysis indicates that these represent roughly 234 distinct submissions. Some proposals contain several land parcels, while others appear more than once in the downloaded data. Together, the records contain stated capacity for around 21,600 homes.

That figure is not a forecast of what will be built.

Some sites overlap. Some compete for the same demand. Some seek to carry forward existing allocations. Some may fail because of access, flooding, environmental, water or commercial constraints. Others may be reduced substantially.

The data does show where development pressure is gathering and who is positioning land before the preferred plan is drawn.

Housing dominates the submissions. Around three quarters of the distinct proposals are explicitly for housing, while approximately 187 contain a positive housing figure.

The largest concentrations are not spread evenly across the Highlands. They gather around Inverness, the Inner Moray Firth, the A9 corridor and the Cromarty Firth industrial zone.

Modern Scot's analysis found proposed capacity of approximately 6,000 homes in the Inverness group, around 2,000 in Nairn, 1,800 in Tain, more than 1,300 around North Kessock and more than 1,000 in Alness.

This is not a balanced regional housing pattern. It is a growth corridor.

A small number of developers are strongly positioned

A limited number of housebuilders appear repeatedly across the submissions.

Modern Scot identified Springfield Properties in bids containing nearly 4,900 stated homes and Tulloch Homes in submissions containing more than 2,200. Those totals may include competing, overlapping or ultimately unsuccessful sites, but they show how strongly a small number of companies are positioned before site selection begins.

At Bellfield Farm near North Kessock, Springfield has submitted 64.87 hectares of undeveloped or

agricultural land for approximately 1,000 homes. A separate proposal north of the A9 seeks around 250 more.

At Ardersier Mains, Springfield proposes up to 600 homes, a primary school and community facilities on 35 hectares of undeveloped farmland.

At Alness East, 50.7 hectares held by Pat Munro, Highland Council and Rosskeen Farms have been submitted for around 800 homes, including a stated 25% affordable element. Nearby council-owned land at Crosshills is proposed for another 215 mixed-tenure homes.

Large housing schemes are therefore being positioned beside anticipated industrial, port and energy development.

The site map does not establish that roads, water, wastewater treatment, schools, childcare, GP services, shops or public transport can carry all of it.

Public planning decisions can create private value

Most of the submitted land already appears to be privately owned by housebuilders, farms, estates, churches, investment interests and individual landowners.

The central issue is not privatisation in the simple sense. It is the increase in value created through allocation.

Agricultural or undeveloped land may become worth substantially more once it is identified for housing or industry. A public planning decision can therefore create considerable private wealth before a road is laid or a house is built.

That does not make allocation improper. Homes, workplaces and services require land.

The public-interest question is what the Highlands receive in return.

That return might include social-rented housing, roads, schools, drainage, active travel, public transport, long-term rental supply, community facilities or a continuing public stake in the development.

The present site register does not show the full bargain.

Public land is also entering the development pipeline

Highland Council appears as owner or joint owner in a significant number of submissions.

At Abbotshill in Tain, approximately 31 hectares of council-owned farmland are proposed for around 300 homes. The ownership record states that the land is subject to an agricultural tenancy.

Council land also appears in proposals at Alness, Dingwall, Invergordon and Inverness.

These entries do not prove that the council intends to sell the land. Public sites could be developed directly, leased, transferred to a housing association, retained through partnership or disposed of to a private builder.

The structure matters.

Public land can secure affordable housing and long-term public value. It can also be sold into a model in which most of the land-value uplift passes into private development.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise also appears as owner of business and industrial land, including Alness Point Business Park. The same questions apply: what public investment prepares the site, who ultimately controls

it and how much long-term value remains public?

The public needs those answers before major allocations are confirmed.

The housing totals do not show who will be able to live there

The word “affordable” appears throughout the submissions, but it does not automatically mean council or housing-association homes at social rent.

It may include discounted sale, shared equity, mid-market rent, serviced plots, developer contributions or credits delivered elsewhere.

At Muiralehouse in Avoch, Tulloch proposes around 200 homes, described as 150 private and 50 affordable. Springfield has put forward a separate proposal for around 150 homes in the same area. At Rosehaugh, Tulloch seeks 40 homes, of which two are described as affordable because affordable-housing credits had already been supplied elsewhere.

A total housing figure therefore does not show whether local workers, tenants, young families or people on council waiting lists will be able to live there.

A development can increase the housing stock while failing to solve the housing problem.

The council should publish a tenure breakdown for every major site: private sale, social rent, mid-market rent, discounted sale, care housing, worker accommodation and any other category.

Without that, the Highlands could receive thousands of houses while continuing to lose the people required to keep its communities functioning.

Building outside the plan will still be possible

A person will still be able to apply to build a home outside an allocated site.

Scotland operates a plan-led planning system, but land outside the plan is not automatically closed to development. Applications will continue to be judged against National Planning Framework 4, the local development plan then in force and other material considerations.

The difference is that allocation settles much of the principle in advance.

A major site inside the plan begins with the expectation that development may be acceptable. A house outside it, particularly in the more tightly controlled Hinterland around Inverness, Easter Ross and Fort William, may face a much harder policy test.

Small rural housing may still be permitted where it meets recognised requirements, including certain land-management needs, replacement or conversion of buildings, appropriate affordable housing or other policy exceptions.

The new plan will not make every unallocated field untouchable. It will, however, give selected land a much clearer route towards development.

Farmland is the principal source of proposed housing land

The strongest physical pattern in the data is the proposed conversion of agricultural and undeveloped ground.

Modern Scot's analysis identified roughly 194 distinct submissions describing their current use as farmland or undeveloped land. Around 164 of those are proposed for housing.

This means the emerging housing strategy is not based mainly on reusing empty buildings, brownfield land and already urbanised sites.

A substantial part of it depends on fields, grazing land, settlement edges and farms.

Once land is covered by roads, drainage, foundations and utilities, returning it to productive agriculture becomes difficult and often unrealistic.

The consequences extend beyond lost acreage. Farms may be divided into less workable parcels. Tenancies may become less secure. Nearby land prices may rise. Drainage patterns may change. Settlements may spread into increasingly car-dependent estates.

At Ardgay, Balnagown Estate has submitted two sites for approximately 70 homes each. One is subject to a Modern Limited Duration Tenancy expiring in 2030. The record does not indicate that the tenant is being removed, but it shows development positioning taking place while agricultural occupation continues.

At Avoch, Church of Scotland glebe land leased to a local resident has been proposed for housing. Other sites are controlled through developer option agreements rather than outright ownership.

Every proposal must eventually be assessed on its own facts. Taken together, however, the submissions raise a wider land-use question.

How much productive and tenanted ground should be lost, and what public benefit must justify that loss?

For every selected site, the council should publish the agricultural quality of the land, its present use, whether it is tenanted, what farming function it performs and why brownfield or already allocated land cannot meet the same need.

Housing growth is being discussed before services are secured

The most serious weakness in the process is the gap between land allocation and the services required to make a place liveable.

A development plan can identify land for schools, shops, childcare, roads, health facilities, employment and public transport.

It cannot guarantee a staffed GP surgery, nursery places, teachers, midwives, dentists, regular buses, operating shops or sufficient water and wastewater capacity.

Those depend on separate public bodies, budgets and private operators.

Some major submissions mention primary schools, local centres and community facilities. That is not the same as a funded school, a staffed nursery, an occupied shop or a functioning health service.

This is especially important in Caithness.

Caithness General has a midwife-led community maternity unit for people assessed as suitable for low-risk local birth, but it does not provide the full consultant-led obstetric service available at Raigmore. Some women must travel considerable distances for specialist or higher-risk care.

That is the kind of practical service constraint that must be measured against proposed population growth.

No major housing allocation should be accepted merely because land is available. The council should identify the road, school, childcare, health, retail, water, sewerage and employment capacity required—and show who is committed to delivering it.

Without that, the plan risks creating housing estates rather than functioning communities.

The jobs case remains incomplete

Some housing proposals sit near expected employment growth, particularly around Inverness, Ardersier, Alness and the Cromarty Firth.

There are separate submissions for ports, offshore-wind manufacturing, industrial land, distribution, battery infrastructure and renewable-energy uses.

At Balblair Quarry near Beaulay, Lovat Estates has proposed approximately 53 hectares for industrial development, storage, distribution, one or more data centres and a renewable-energy hub after quarrying ends.

That is not yet a confirmed data-centre development. It is an early land-use signal.

What is missing is a clear public account connecting proposed housing numbers to permanent employment.

Construction may create jobs for several years. Energy, port and data projects may attract substantial capital. Their permanent workforces may be much smaller than the scale of the developments suggests.

The plan should show how many permanent jobs are expected, what skills they require, whether local people will be trained for them, where workers will live and what happens when construction ends.

Housing without employment can deepen car dependency and service pressure. Employment without affordable housing can displace local workers.

Both problems are already familiar across the Highlands.

Fort George raises a public-asset question

The Ministry of Defence has submitted Fort George near Ardersier.

The 51.7-hectare site is described as an active military barracks and tourist destination. The submission records possible housing, community, business, tourism, retail and industrial uses, with an initial housing trajectory of 45 homes. It also states that the MOD has announced the site for disposal in 2033.

The important issue is the future of a major public, military and heritage estate.

The submission does not say who may acquire it, whether public access will continue, which buildings could enter private ownership or how commercial use would be reconciled with the site's historic importance.

This is advance planning for a post-military future.

The public-interest test is whether a nationally important asset remains accessible, protected and capable of delivering lasting value after the MOD leaves.

Two different Highland housing crises

The submissions reveal two different development markets.

The eastern growth corridor is attracting large private proposals of hundreds or thousands of homes.

Fragile rural, west-coast and island communities are generally putting forward much smaller schemes—sometimes two, ten or twenty homes—to retain population, house workers or support community-led development.

At Anancaun near Kinlochewe, a community submission proposes only two or three homes, stating that the lack of housing is holding back the social and economic future of a fragile rural community.

At Broadford and elsewhere on Skye, common-grazings and community-linked land has been proposed for modest affordable development.

The private market is naturally drawn to places where large developments are easier to finance and sell.

That could leave communities with the greatest social need receiving the least commercial interest.

A plan judged mainly by total house numbers may deepen the imbalance: rapid expansion around Inverness and the Moray Firth while remote communities continue to lose population and services.

The public can still shape the record

The Call for Ideas closes on 18 September 2026.

Residents can identify land or buildings that should be developed, reused, protected or improved. They can submit evidence about roads, schools, health services, water, wastewater, flood risk, agricultural use, habitats, public transport, childcare and community facilities.

They cannot yet lodge a statutory objection to an individual submitted site.

That opportunity comes later, when Highland Council chooses which sites to include in the proposed plan.

Communities can also prepare or use Local Place Plans, allowing community-controlled organisations and community councils to set out their own spatial priorities.

The present stage is therefore not the moment to declare that any developer bid has been approved.

It is the moment to place a clear public record beside the developer submissions.

The Highlands need housing. They also need jobs, maternity care, childcare, shops, roads, buses, schools, water infrastructure and communities capable of surviving once construction crews leave.

Those needs cannot be reduced to a total number of homes on a map.

Landowners and developers have already positioned thousands of proposed homes and extensive areas of land. The public has not yet received a complete account of farmland loss, housing tenure, infrastructure capacity, permanent employment, land-value uplift or the future of public assets.

The Highlands are being positioned, parcel by parcel, for a development market whose ownership, value and benefits are more concentrated than the public presentation suggests.

The public still has an opportunity to influence the plan.

It is not yet the opportunity to object to the individual sites.

It is the opportunity to insist that land allocation follows services, employment, food security, public value and community need—not merely the ambitions of those who submitted land first.

Methodology

Modern Scot grouped the downloaded records by submission number to reduce duplication caused by multi-parcel entries, then totalled the housing figures stated by site promoters. The results remain indicative because proposals may overlap, compete with one another, repeat existing allocations or contain estimates that Highland Council has not verified.

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ENVIRONMENT | 10 July 2026

Scotland's Glens May Become Britain's Energy Battery

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-glens-may-become-britains-energy-battery/>



Scotland's environmental regulator is preparing new guidance for large hydropower and pumped-storage schemes at the point when some of the largest proposed changes to the Highland landscape are moving closer to financial support.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency opened a consultation on 24 June 2026 covering new or modified hydropower schemes involving more than 24 hours of

water storage. It includes pumped-storage developments, in which electricity is used to move water to an upper reservoir before it is released through turbines when power is required. The consultation closes on 16 September.

The guidance is presented as a consolidation of existing regulations, policies and technical requirements rather than a change in the law. Its effect may nevertheless be considerable. It will tell developers what evidence they must provide, which environmental effects SEPA will examine and how Scotland's water regulator intends to approach schemes capable of raising lochs, flooding land and repeatedly moving tens of millions of cubic metres of water through Highland glens.

Pumped storage is being promoted as part of the answer to an electricity system increasingly dependent upon wind. When generation is abundant and demand is low, electricity can pump water uphill. When demand rises or renewable output falls, the water can be released to generate power.

The process does not create electricity. It loses some energy during pumping and generation. Its value lies in storing power for later use and responding rapidly when the wider electricity network requires support.

That creates a classic political tension. The system benefits are spread across Great Britain, while the most immediate physical costs are concentrated in a small number of Highland communities.

For energy planners, the glens offer height, water and space. For the people living in them, the same projects can mean raised lochs, new dams, tunnels, quarries, access roads, substations, spoil heaps and years of heavy construction.

The difference between the national and local perspectives is not a misunderstanding. It is the central issue raised by this new phase of energy development.

The physical scale

The Earba pumped-storage proposal on the Ardverikie Estate gives the clearest indication of the scale involved.

The project would use Loch Earba as its lower reservoir and Loch Leamhain as its upper reservoir. Application documents say Loch Leamhain would be raised by approximately 75 metres, from around 635

metres above ordnance datum to approximately 710 metres. Loch Earba would be raised by about 23 to 25 metres. The active volume of stored water at Loch Leamhain would be approximately 61 million cubic metres.

A rise of 75 metres is not a minor adjustment to an existing loch. It would create a substantially different water body held behind a major new dam. Land around the present shoreline would be submerged, paths and habitats would be displaced, and the appearance and use of the glen would change permanently.

Construction would require more than the visible dams. Large pumped-storage schemes generally need tunnels through rock, underground or partially underground generating equipment, construction compounds, borrow pits or quarries, spoil-disposal areas and connections to the high-voltage network.

These are multi-billion-pound industrial projects built in places known for their relative quiet, ecological value and sparse population. Even where the final generating machinery is largely hidden, the construction period may bring years of blasting, dust, worker accommodation, road disruption and heavy goods traffic.

Those costs are immediate and local. The electricity benefits are distributed much more widely.

Water will no longer behave as it does now

Pumped storage also changes the function of a loch.

A natural or traditionally managed water body rises and falls according to rainfall, evaporation, river flow and existing abstraction. A pumped-storage reservoir is operated according to the requirements and prices of the electricity system.

Water may be moved quickly between upper and lower reservoirs as the plant charges and discharges. The frequency and scale of those movements can affect shoreline habitat, sediment, water temperature, aquatic plants and fish.

SEPA's draft guidance recognises that storage and pumped-storage schemes can cause serious environmental harm. It requires developers to address changes to flows, water levels, physical habitat, sediment transport, fish movement and the cumulative effect of other developments. The guidance does not presume that pumped storage is harmless simply because it can support renewable generation.

The effects will differ between projects. A carefully operated reservoir may keep fluctuations within defined limits, while another development may fundamentally alter an existing loch and its surrounding catchment. The environmental case therefore has to be examined at scheme level rather than accepted from the general description of pumped storage as "green".

Fish are a particular concern.

Wild salmon and other freshwater species depend upon suitable river flows, temperatures, spawning gravels and access between habitats. Altered releases, rapidly changing levels or sediment movement can affect those conditions. The Earba application includes separate work on aquatic ecology and a protection plan for Arctic charr, itself evidence that the biological consequences require specific management rather than assumption.

The risk is not confined to wildlife in the abstract. Salmon fishing, angling, wildlife tourism and the reputation of Highland rivers and lochs all have economic value. Damage to those systems would be carried locally even where the electricity supports consumers and businesses hundreds of miles away.

Loch Ness and the Great Glen

The Loch Kemp proposal would use Loch Ness as its lower reservoir and Loch Kemp as the upper storage body.

Statera Energy says the project would have generating capacity of up to 600MW and could supply power for as long as 15 hours. Water would be pumped from Loch Ness into Loch Kemp during periods of excess electricity and released back through turbines when the grid required generation.

Loch Kemp would not operate in isolation. The Great Glen already contains the Foyers pumped-storage station, while other large storage proposals are being considered in the wider Highland region.

This makes cumulative assessment essential.

A single operator may be able to demonstrate that the effect of its own abstraction, discharge or water-level change remains within a modelled limit. That does not necessarily show what happens when several schemes use connected catchments, draw upon the same labour and road networks, or require new transmission infrastructure in the same region.

The national question is not only whether each project can pass its own assessment. It is how much industrial use of the Great Glen and surrounding water system Scotland is prepared to accept in total.

SEPA's guidance says cumulative effects must be considered. The strength of that requirement will depend upon whether applications are assessed against other projects already operating, consented, proposed or reasonably foreseeable—not merely those that have completed the same stage of the regulatory process.

Coire Glas and the scale of the new system

SSE's Coire Glas project near Loch Lochy is proposed at 1.4GW, with at least 45GWh of storage. If built, it would be one of the largest electricity-storage facilities in Britain.

Projects of this size could make an important contribution during prolonged periods of low renewable output, help absorb electricity that might otherwise be curtailed and provide rapid support to the system.

They may also create a new concentration of strategic infrastructure in the Highlands.

Concentration is not automatically unsafe. Dams, tunnels and generating stations are subject to engineering, planning and safety requirements. It would be irresponsible to suggest that the presence of several schemes makes structural failure likely.

There is, however, a legitimate resilience question. A future electricity system that depends heavily upon a small number of very large storage assets must consider what happens when one is unavailable because of maintenance, a technical fault, low water availability or an incident affecting its connection to the grid.

The same landscape may also be carrying several forms of infrastructure at once: reservoirs, transmission lines, substations, wind farms and access roads. Project-by-project approval can obscure the cumulative transformation.

The financial bargain

The environmental consultation is taking place alongside a separate decision about financial support.

On 26 June, Ofgem provisionally selected 16 long-duration electricity-storage projects to proceed through the next stage of its first cap-and-floor support window. The system is intended to make projects with large initial costs and uncertain future revenues financeable.

The floor provides an approved minimum revenue level where a qualifying project's market income falls below the regulated threshold. The cap limits how much revenue the operator may retain above another threshold, with part of the excess returned for the benefit of consumers.

It is too crude to describe this simply as consumers bailing out companies that fail to make a profit. The floor is a planned regulatory mechanism designed to reduce investment risk before construction begins, not an emergency rescue after commercial failure.

The public exposure is nevertheless real.

Consumers help provide revenue certainty that private developers and investors say is necessary before committing billions of pounds. In return, the cap is intended to prevent companies retaining unlimited gains if market revenues are exceptionally high.

The important public question is whether the cap, floor and project-specific terms provide fair value for the risk transferred to consumers.

A privately owned scheme may receive regulated revenue protection while using a Scottish glen, loch or estate for many decades. The operator may earn income from electricity trading and grid services, while households contribute through the wider electricity-market arrangements if revenues fall below the approved floor.

That does not prove that the bargain is unfair. It does mean the argument cannot stop at the claim that pumped storage will help renewable power.

The public is contributing more than scenery. It may also contribute financial certainty.

Who owns the value?

The major projects are being advanced by private or commercially operated developers.

Coire Glas is promoted by SSE Renewables. Loch Kemp is being developed by Statera Energy. Earba is being developed by Gilkes Energy through the relevant project company.

The land and water arrangements differ between schemes, and it would be inaccurate to state that every affected loch or estate is publicly owned. Much Highland land is privately held, while water use and environmental activity are controlled through public regulation.

The broader point remains. Scotland provides the geography that makes these developments possible: elevation, rainfall, water bodies, existing hydro experience and access to renewable generation. The resulting power is traded within the Great Britain electricity system, and the commercial return flows according to company ownership and financing structures.

Local employment may be substantial during construction. Permanent employment is likely to be much smaller once the plants are operating.

Community-benefit arrangements may provide local funds, but voluntary payments should not be confused with ownership or a permanent share of operating revenue. A community fund can support halls, paths and

local projects while the long-term value of a strategic national asset continues to accrue elsewhere.

Scotland has encountered this pattern before. Land, water and energy are developed for a wider market; local places carry the physical infrastructure; and the public discussion centres upon mitigation rather than ownership.

Pumped storage risks becoming another version of the same arrangement unless the financial structure is made clear before projects are locked in.

The Highland perspective

For people living near these developments, the primary concern is not the theoretical performance of the electricity market.

It is the loss or alteration of familiar land, the effect on roads and homes during construction, the future of rivers and fish, and the possibility that tourism and local amenity will be weakened to support a system whose main benefits are experienced elsewhere.

The disruption is concentrated, physical and immediate.

The glen does not receive a fraction of a new dam. It receives the whole dam. Residents do not experience a nationally averaged amount of construction traffic. They experience the lorries passing their homes.

That imbalance can produce a distinctly extractive feeling: Highland land and water are taken into a national system, while the environmental burden remains attached to the place.

The concern does not disappear because the electricity is described as renewable. A low-carbon objective can still be pursued through a structure that distributes costs and benefits unevenly.

The wider Scottish perspective

For households elsewhere in Scotland, the landscape effects may feel remote. Their exposure is more likely to appear through electricity costs, regulated support and the reliability of the future power system.

Pumped storage may reduce other system costs by absorbing surplus wind generation, avoiding some constraint payments and supplying electricity when prices would otherwise be high. Ofgem and the National Energy System Operator are assessing projects partly on their expected system value, not simply on the amount of storage they can build.

Those benefits must be measured against the floor support, construction risk reflected in the financial framework and the possibility that projected savings do not emerge as expected.

The relevant comparison is not between paying for pumped storage and paying nothing. A wind-heavy electricity system will require flexibility from some combination of storage, interconnection, demand response and dispatchable generation.

The question is which combination provides the best value, where the costs fall and who owns the resulting assets.

Scottish consumers should therefore be able to see the expected cost of the cap-and-floor support, the forecast system savings, the permitted private return and the circumstances in which money is paid to or recovered from operators.

Without that information, “energy security” can become a broad public justification for a financial arrangement that remains difficult for the public to inspect.

The new rules arrive before the national plan

SEPA is responsible for protecting Scotland’s water environment. It is not responsible for deciding the complete future shape of Scotland’s electricity system.

Ofgem considers market support. The National Energy System Operator examines system need. Scottish ministers determine major generating-station applications. Planning authorities consider local land use. Network companies assess connections.

Each process has a purpose. Taken separately, none answers the central national question:

How many Highland glens and lochs should be converted into large-scale electricity storage, and what should Scotland receive in return?

The new SEPA guidance may improve consistency and require better information from developers. It may also make the regulatory route clearer just as private projects approach financial backing.

Clarity can protect the environment, but it can also accelerate development by showing companies how to satisfy the process.

That is why the consultation matters before the schemes become ordinary construction stories.

Scotland is not merely deciding how to regulate machinery beside a loch. It is deciding whether parts of the Highlands will become physical components of Britain’s electricity-storage system.

The national benefit may be substantial. So may the local cost.

The rules now being written must account for cumulative damage, water and wildlife, years of construction disruption, public financial exposure and the division between private ownership and public sacrifice.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 10 July 2026

After 25 Years of Private Operation, Daldowie Returns to Scottish Water With a £460m Investment Question

Read online: <https://modern.scot/after-25-years-of-private-operation-daldowie-returns-to-scottish-water-with-a-460m-investment-question/>



When Scotland's largest sewage-processing facility at Daldowie returned to public control on 1 April 2026, it marked the end of a 25-year private finance contract, leaving taxpayers to inherit an aging, high-emission asset requiring a £460 million modernization. This transition exposes the long-term financial burden of private-finance initiatives, where deferred infrastructure costs eventually return to create significant public debt and drive up household water

bills.

One of Scotland's most important sewage-sludge treatment facilities has returned to public control after 25 years of private operation, just as Scottish Water prepares for an investment programme around the site expected to cost approximately £460m.

The Daldowie facility near Glasgow processes the solids removed from wastewater across Greater Glasgow and other parts of west-central Scotland. Its private-finance contract ended on 1 April 2026, transferring responsibility for the ageing plant to Scottish Water. The public corporation now proposes to replace its gas-fired drying system with an advanced anaerobic-digestion facility capable of recovering energy from sewage sludge.

The development presents a rare opportunity to examine the complete life of privately financed public infrastructure: the reason it was created, the payments made during its operation, the condition in which it was returned and the public investment required once the contract ended.

The existing plant was developed around the turn of the century, when Scotland needed an alternative to disposing of sewage sludge at sea. Under the private-finance model, a private company financed, built, operated and maintained the facility while the public water authority paid for the service over the contractual period.

The contractual operator was SMW Limited, originally associated with ScottishPower. Drax later acquired Daldowie as part of a wider purchase of ScottishPower generation assets. In its acquisition documents, Drax described the site as a 50,000-tonne biomass-from-waste facility supported by a firm agreement with Scottish Water until 2026.

For most households, Daldowie remained almost invisible. Wastewater arrived at treatment works, solids were removed, and the resulting sludge was transported or pumped for further processing. At Daldowie, much of that material was dried using natural gas and converted into pellets capable of being used as waste-derived fuel.

The plant performed an essential public function, but the technology chosen in the late 1990s now carries a heavy operating and environmental burden. Scottish Water describes the existing process as dated, energy-intensive and expensive to maintain. It estimates that the operation produces about 40,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions each year, largely because of the gas required to dry the sludge.

An old plant reaching the end of its working life does not, by itself, prove that the private operator failed to maintain it. A facility can comply with its contract and still return to public ownership requiring major renewal after 25 years.

The more important question lies in whether the full cost of that lifecycle is visible.

There is no single, readily accessible public account setting out the total paid under the Daldowie agreement, the proportion attributable to finance, operation and maintenance, the value of the asset at transfer or any final compensation paid to the operator. Nor has a public handback report been identified showing the condition of the principal equipment, its remaining life and whether deductions were made before the contract expired.

Those omissions matter because the facility has not returned as a modern asset capable of serving Scotland for another generation without substantial expenditure.

The Water Industry Commission for Scotland says Scottish Water proposes to build an advanced anaerobic-digestion plant as part of a wider west-central Scotland system for treating, recovering and disposing of biosolids. The combined programme is expected to cost around £460m across Daldowie and the other sites that would depend upon it. The regulator's documentation attributes approximately £325m of investment during the 2027–33 period directly to the west-central bioresources project at Daldowie, with further expenditure required for supporting works elsewhere.

It would be inaccurate to describe the entire £460m as the price of replacing one building. The figure covers a broader regional strategy centred on the new Daldowie facility.

The proposed process would treat sludge with heat and pressure before feeding it into sealed digesters. Microorganisms would break down the material and produce biogas, which could supply heat and electricity to the plant. Surplus gas could potentially be upgraded to biomethane and exported to the gas network. The remaining treated biosolids could be used on agricultural land, subject to environmental and quality controls.

This would replace an energy-hungry disposal process with one intended to recover usable energy and nutrients. It would also turn Daldowie into an even more important national asset, concentrating a large part of west-central Scotland's sludge treatment at one location.

That concentration creates its own risk. A serious breakdown, delayed commissioning, permit restriction or construction problem at Daldowie could affect wastewater treatment across a much wider area than Glasgow. The cost estimate therefore concerns both the construction of a new plant and the resilience of an essential service that cannot simply stop while infrastructure is replaced.

The financial consequences are already beginning to appear. Scottish Water forecast an additional £25.179m of operating expenditure in 2026–27 following the end of the Daldowie PFI contract. Across all returning PFI facilities, its draft plans anticipate around £80m in additional annual operating costs as assets move back under direct public control, while payments to private operators gradually decline.

That does not mean the end of PFI automatically makes the service more expensive. Payments previously recorded as private-finance fees are replaced by direct staffing, energy, maintenance and operating costs.

The public accounts change shape as responsibility changes hands.

The regulator has nevertheless asked for stronger evidence behind Scottish Water's spending plans. It has identified the Daldowie programme as one of the investment cases requiring further examination and has warned that the wider investment programme will place substantial pressure on future charges. Scottish Water's draft business plan proposed annual increases of inflation plus 4% between 2027 and 2033, although the final settlement remains a regulatory decision rather than an agreed bill increase.

Daldowie cannot fairly be blamed for the entire rise. Scotland's water system also requires expenditure on ageing pipes, treatment works, sewer overflows, drinking-water quality and resilience. The scale of the proposed programme does mean that the return of privately operated assets is becoming part of the financial burden carried by the public water system.

There are further questions around what value the new plant will create. Biomethane, electricity and recovered materials could produce useful income. Whether those revenues remain wholly within Scottish Water will depend upon the construction, financing and operating agreements ultimately selected. Public ownership of the site does not automatically guarantee public control of every future contract or commercial return.

The same scrutiny should apply to the treated material intended for farmland. Sewage sludge contains valuable nutrients, but it can also carry contaminants entering the sewer network from homes, hospitals, roads and industry. A regional plant processing material on this scale will require transparent testing, traceability and clear responsibility for any later environmental damage. Nothing presently identified establishes that Daldowie biosolids are unsafe; the scale of the proposed operation makes long-term monitoring essential.

Daldowie is therefore more than a Glasgow infrastructure project. It is a test of what Scotland receives when a long private-finance agreement reaches its end, but at a massive cost.

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ENERGY | 10 July 2026

Scotland Put Back on Britain's Nuclear Map

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-put-back-on-britains-nuclear-map-without-its-governments-consent/>



Torness, Dounreay and Hunterston have been placed back on Britain's prospective nuclear map after a UK Government study found that several parts of Scotland could technically accommodate new reactors.

The assessment also identified broad areas around the Firth of Forth and along the Angus and Aberdeenshire coast. It stops well short of recommending construction. No detailed grid study was completed, no reactor technology was selected, no commercial case was prepared and no communities, landowners or local

authorities were consulted.

The report establishes that Scotland has land that survives an initial desktop screening exercise. It does not establish that a reactor is needed, affordable, environmentally acceptable or likely to receive planning consent.

That distinction has been blurred by the political presentation surrounding its publication.

The UK Government said Scotland had "high potential" for nuclear development and argued that its communities were missing investment and employment opportunities being pursued in England and Wales. Energy minister Michael Shanks called for a new dialogue over Scotland's energy policy.

The technical report itself is more guarded. Great British Energy–Nuclear examined geography, cooling-water access, population density, transport, terrain, environmental constraints and proximity to energy infrastructure. Its purpose was to identify areas that might justify further investigation, rather than determine that any site was ready for development.

Torness in East Lothian is among the clearest possibilities. It already has a nuclear workforce, coastal cooling water, grid infrastructure and transport connections. Its present reactors are due to stop generating in March 2030, leaving Scotland without an operating civil nuclear station unless their life is extended again or a replacement is eventually built.

The surrounding coast also contains environmentally protected areas, heritage interests and land exposed to flooding. A new station would require a full examination of those constraints rather than merely inheriting the acceptability of the existing plant.

Dounreay offers a different case. Caithness has decades of nuclear experience and a workforce already facing the long decline of decommissioning employment. The site is remote, however, and its distance from major centres of electricity demand, weaker transport connections and uncertain future grid role would all need to be addressed.

Hunterston in North Ayrshire also retains nuclear infrastructure and skills, but the study identifies limited flat land, coastal-flood concerns and competition from surrounding settlements, environmental interests and

other grid development.

The remaining areas are even less precise. Parts of the Firth of Forth were retained because of industrial land, transport links and proximity to major energy users. The same land is already being sought for ports, hydrogen, offshore-wind manufacturing, electricity infrastructure, housing and data centres. Industrial hazards, pipelines and flood risk further restrict what might be possible.

Along the Angus and Aberdeenshire coast, the report identifies cooling-water access, electricity infrastructure and workers with transferable oil, gas and offshore engineering skills. It does not name a town or a specific development site. Reporting that a nuclear station has been proposed for either council area would therefore go beyond the evidence.

The study arrives during a renewed political argument over nuclear power. The Scottish Parliament debated the subject on 24 June, less than a week before the report was published. Supporters argued that Scotland was abandoning dependable low-carbon generation, skilled work and industrial investment. Opponents pointed to construction delays, cost overruns, radioactive waste and the rapid growth of renewable electricity.

The Scottish Government continues to oppose new stations using current nuclear technologies. It permits Scotland's existing reactors to operate while regulators consider them safe, but maintains that new nuclear is expensive and would leave further waste and decommissioning liabilities. Scotland now has one operating station, one civil site in defuelling and three civil sites at advanced stages of decommissioning. Nuclear supplied around 17% of Scotland's electricity generation in 2024.

That leaves an unusual division of authority. Nuclear safety, reactor regulation and much of energy policy are reserved to Westminster, while consent for major generating stations in Scotland remains within the Scottish planning and electricity system.

A project could not proceed under current policy without the Scottish Government reversing its position or Westminster attempting to change the legal arrangements. Either course would be a major political decision, not the routine consequence of a technical report.

Cost remains the most difficult part of the case for new nuclear.

The National Audit Office reported in May that Sizewell C had a baseline construction estimate of £38.2bn and was expected to be completed in summer 2039. Consumers began contributing to the project before construction produced electricity, with the estimated household charge expected to rise as development proceeds. The same report recorded that Hinkley Point C's latest scenarios involved a delay of between five and seven years and costs around twice the original projection.

Small modular reactors are intended to reduce those difficulties through standardised designs and repeated factory production. Britain has not yet completed one, so their eventual cost and construction performance remain projections rather than domestic operating evidence. Great British Energy–Nuclear is beginning work on an initial Rolls-Royce SMR project at Wylfa in North Wales, where three units are planned and the wider site may eventually accommodate more.

Even an immediate Scottish policy reversal would not replace Torness when it closes. Site selection, design approval, finance, planning, construction and commissioning would place any large reactor well into the 2030s or beyond. The nuclear question is therefore about Scotland's longer-term electricity system, not an available answer to a 2030 deadline.

Scotland must still decide how it will replace the firm output and system role of Torness. Wind, storage,

interconnection, flexible demand and other generation may collectively provide the answer, but installed renewable capacity cannot by itself show that sufficient electricity will be available during prolonged periods of low wind.

The UK Government study does not settle that issue. It did not conduct a detailed assessment with the National Energy System Operator and does not demonstrate that the grid needs, or could efficiently accommodate, a reactor at any of the locations identified.

Nor does it answer who would own a Scottish station, where its major components would be manufactured, how profits would flow or who would carry the financial consequences of delay. Scotland could supply land, water, workers and grid infrastructure while strategic ownership and much of the industrial value remained elsewhere.

Radioactive waste is similarly unresolved. Scotland already hosts decades of decommissioning work at Dounreay, Chapelcross and Hunterston. No UK geological disposal facility for the most hazardous waste is operating, while the Scottish and UK governments continue to differ over long-term management policy.

The report is still significant. It marks the first formal move by the present UK Government to return Scotland to the nuclear-development discussion, and it identifies the broad places where that argument could become local and physical.

What it proves is limited but clear: Scotland possesses coastal land, industrial experience and skilled workers that could support further nuclear investigation.

It does not prove that a station should be built.

Before that conclusion could responsibly be reached, Scotland would need a full comparison of nuclear power with storage, renewable generation, interconnection and other firm capacity; transparent estimates of cost and consumer exposure; a credible waste route; evidence of grid need; and direct consultation with the communities being placed on the map.

The UK Government has reopened the nuclear question. It has not yet answered it.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 10 July 2026

Scotland Is Preparing the Rules for Cultivated Meat While Most Scots Say They Would Not Eat It

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-is-preparing-the-rules-for-cultivated-meat-while-most-scots-say-they-would-not-eat-it/>



Food Standards Scotland has helped publish four new guidance documents for businesses developing cell-cultivated and other novel foods, bringing products grown from animal cells another step closer to the British regulatory system.

The guidance, published jointly with the Food Standards Agency on 10 July 2026, covers production methods, microbiological hazards, market-authorisation applications and controlled taste trials. It does not approve any cultivated-meat product for sale, and none is currently authorised for human consumption in Great

Britain. Each product would still require its own safety assessment and ministerial approval before entering the market.

The publication raises a wider Scottish question. Public agencies are devoting money, scientific expertise and regulatory capacity to preparing an industry that does not yet exist at commercial scale here, while farmers and crofters in the Highlands and islands continue to report basic transport problems affecting livestock, freight and access to markets.

The two matters do not come from the same departmental budget, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that money spent assessing cultivated food could simply have purchased a ferry. Food Standards Scotland is a non-ministerial public body, independent of both industry and the Scottish Government, and is responsible for preparing for food-safety risks whether or not ministers favour the product concerned. It is accountable through the Scottish Parliament and funded through a separate budget line.

The comparison nevertheless exposes a question of public priority. Scotland has found the institutional capacity to help companies navigate a future market for food grown in vessels, while island communities remain dependent upon lifeline transport that users repeatedly describe as lacking capacity, reliability and affordable freight space.

A Transport Scotland consultation on the next Northern Isles ferry contract recorded demands for additional freight capacity, more sailings and improved reliability. Crofters and farmers argued that freight charges placed them at a disadvantage compared with mainland producers. Reliability was described by one public body as underpinning every other aspect of a lifeline service.

Cultivated-food regulation and ferry procurement are different functions, but government is ultimately judged across the whole of public life. A country able to look ten years ahead for an experimental food industry should also be capable of securing dependable transport for the agricultural communities already producing food today.

Did Scotland ask whether people wanted it?

There has been no Scottish referendum, national consultation or public vote asking whether people want cultivated meat sold in Scotland.

Nor would such a vote normally be required before regulators began preparing safety standards. Food Standards Scotland's legal responsibility is to anticipate emerging food technologies, identify possible hazards and assess individual applications. Regulation is not the same as promotion, and publishing safety guidance does not compel shops to stock a product or consumers to buy it.

There has, however, been public-opinion research, and its findings are hardly a ringing endorsement.

In the Food and You 2 survey for Scotland, respondents were asked whether they would like to include lab-grown meat in their diets if it became available. Only 28% said they definitely or probably would. Sixty per cent said they probably or definitely would not, while 12% were unsure. Among the 942 online respondents answering the question, only 8% said they would definitely like to try it.

That survey is evidence of public attitudes, not public consent. It does not establish that every Scottish consumer opposes the technology, but it does show that regulators are preparing for a market most respondents said they did not intend to join.

Food Standards Scotland and the FSA also commissioned a wider evidence review of consumer attitudes. It found that most available research concerned cultivated meat rather than dairy, plants or seafood, and that important gaps remained in understanding the views of religious groups, vegetarians, vegans and other sections of the population.

The democratic issue is that the policy discussion has so far been conducted mainly among regulators, scientists and applicant companies. A safety-assessment system answers whether a product may legally be sold. It does not answer whether Scotland wants to subsidise the industry, attract its factories, place it in public procurement or treat it as part of the country's agricultural future.

Those decisions require a broader public discussion.

Where is the proof that it is safe?

There is no body of long-term human evidence proving that cell-cultivated meat as a category is safe to eat for decades. The products are too new, few have been authorised internationally, and consumption has been too limited to provide the sort of population data available for established foods.

That does not mean the products are necessarily unsafe. It means safety cannot be declared for the category in advance.

The British approach is intended to assess each product separately. A company would have to explain the origin and stability of its cells, the ingredients used to grow them, its production process, possible contaminants, allergen risks, nutritional composition and the consistency of manufactured batches. Approval of one cultivated chicken product would not prove the safety of a different beef, pork or seafood product.

An FSA-commissioned hazard review published in 2022 identified a range of potential biological, chemical and manufacturing hazards. These included microbial contamination, residues from growth media, the stability of cell lines, allergens, materials used in processing and contamination introduced during large-scale production. The report described the technology as novel and said cultivated animal cells could present new risks requiring

examination. It was a hazard-identification exercise, not a declaration that the food had already been proved safe.

The current regulatory sandbox exists partly because officials do not yet have all the answers. Its workshops have examined which tests companies should be expected to conduct, how taste trials involving unauthorised foods should be managed and what evidence is necessary to demonstrate safety.

The responsible position is therefore neither to claim that cultivated meat is inherently dangerous nor to describe it as established and safe. It remains an emerging manufacturing process whose products must be judged from evidence supplied for each application.

The burden of proof should rest with the producer.

Would the health risks associated with meat disappear?

Not automatically.

Cultivated meat is often presented as though removing the farm and slaughterhouse also removes every health concern associated with eating meat. That conclusion is not supported by the evidence.

In 2015, the World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer concluded that processed meat causes colorectal cancer and classified red meat as probably carcinogenic to humans. Its analysis estimated that eating 50g of processed meat daily was associated with an 18% increase in colorectal-cancer risk. The agency stressed that the absolute risk to an individual remained comparatively small but rose with the amount consumed.

Some of the mechanisms under investigation concern processing, preservatives and high-temperature cooking. Others may relate to components naturally present in red meat, including haem iron. A cultivated product designed to reproduce the composition, fat, colour and cooking behaviour of conventional red meat may also reproduce some of those characteristics.

If cultivated cells are turned into sausages, burgers, cured products or other heavily processed foods, the fact that the cells began in a bioreactor would not transform the finished product into a health food. Salt, saturated fat, nitrites, smoke flavourings, binders and cooking methods would still matter.

There may also be opportunities to alter the nutritional profile. Producers might reduce saturated fat, omit particular preservatives or change the ratio of nutrients. Such changes could produce a different health outcome, but that would depend upon the actual product. It cannot be assumed merely from the production method.

The proper comparison is not "farm meat bad, cultivated meat safe". It is between two particular foods, their ingredients, nutritional composition, processing and patterns of consumption.

Scotland's role is already substantial

Scotland is not merely observing the field.

Researchers at the Roslin Institute developed a pig stem-cell line capable of repeated growth while retaining its ability to form fat. The work could help companies create cultivated fat, which contributes flavour, texture and cooking behaviour to meat products. The cells are being made available to academic and commercial researchers. The research is valuable, although it is not an approved food product and does not establish long-term dietary safety.

Scotland also produced ENOUGH, formerly 3F BIO, a Glasgow-headquartered company using fungal biomass fermentation to make protein for meat and dairy alternatives. Its large manufacturing plant is in the Netherlands rather than Scotland.

The pattern deserves attention. Scotland may supply regulation, research, livestock knowledge and intellectual property while production plants, brands and profits are established elsewhere.

At the same time, conventional agriculture remains embedded in Scotland's rural economy. Farms and crofts sustain food production, haulage, veterinary services, auction marts, abattoirs and island communities. Their immediate concern is less likely to be whether cultured pork fat can be grown successfully than whether animals, feed and finished products can reach the mainland reliably and at a viable cost.

The new guidance is legitimate regulatory preparation. It should not be mistaken for public approval, proof of long-term safety or a settled agricultural policy.

Food Standards Scotland has begun answering the question of what evidence a company must provide before cultivated food may be sold. Scotland has yet to answer the larger questions: whether people want it, how it will be labelled, whether its claimed health benefits withstand scrutiny, what public money will support it, and whether the country will protect the farmers and crofters who are already producing food while institutions prepare for those who may one day grow it in tanks.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 10 July 2026

Fifty Rural Mobile Masts Upgraded Across Scotland as Coverage Reaches Further into Remote Areas

Read online: <https://modern.scot/fifty-rural-mobile-masts-upgraded-across-scotland-as-coverage-reaches-further-into-remote-areas/>



Fifty publicly funded mobile masts have been activated across rural Scotland, extending access to all four major mobile networks. The latest site is near Branault on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. Other upgrades cover parts of Arran, Islay and Jura, Tarbert on the Kintyre peninsula and the Duke's Pass in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. Together, the 50 sites are expected to provide four-network 4G coverage across more than 1,900 sq km. The work forms part of the Shared Rural Network, a £1bn agreement announced in 2020 between the UK

government and EE, O2, Three and Vodafone. The operators committed more than £530m to improve their own networks, while more than £500m in public funding was directed towards areas considered unlikely to attract commercial investment. Most of the Scottish sites are upgrades to existing masts rather than new structures. Many previously served EE customers and emergency services but have now been adapted to carry the other networks. More than 140 publicly funded upgrades have been completed across Great Britain, including 50 in Scotland. For rural communities, the practical effect can be significant. Improved coverage can help businesses take card payments, manage deliveries and contact staff working alone. It can also allow drivers, walkers and others in remote areas to report accidents, share their location and access maps. Government research has found that poor mobile coverage is a particular concern for people working alone in agriculture and forestry, and for those taking part in outdoor activities. Respondents also linked stronger coverage with better access to services, more opportunities for mobile working and reduced isolation. The latest upgrades are part of a longer effort to improve rural connectivity in Scotland. The Scottish government published its Mobile Action Plan in 2016 and launched the Scottish 4G Infill programme two years later. That scheme invested £28.75m in 55 masts serving rural and island areas which had previously lacked 4G coverage. All were operating by 2024. The figures show clear progress, although they also reveal the scale of the remaining problem. In 2020, Ofcom estimated that 81% of Scotland's landmass had good 4G coverage from at least one operator, but only 44% was covered by all four. By July 2025, all-operator geographic coverage had risen to 67%. Scotland still remained behind Wales, Northern Ireland and England, where the equivalent figures were 77%, 85% and 90%. Ofcom also reported that 99% of Scottish premises had predicted outdoor 4G coverage from all four operators in 2025. The difference reflects Scotland's settlement pattern. Most homes may be covered while large stretches of mountain, moorland, forestry and remote roads remain outside one or more networks. Coverage figures also do not guarantee reliable indoor reception. Signal strength can still be affected by terrain, building materials, distance from a mast and the network being used. In June 2025, the UK government and mobile operators agreed to reduce the number of entirely new masts planned for remote parts of Scotland. The remaining investment is being redirected towards places where people live, work and travel regularly. The revised plans include parts of Glen Coe, Wester Ross, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, Mull, South Uist and Skye. The activation of the fiftieth site

marks substantial progress. Scotland has moved from a position where fewer than half of its landmass could receive 4G from every operator to one where the figure is approaching seven in ten. The hardest gaps are likely to be the last ones left. Significant parts of the Highlands and Islands continue to experience unreliable indoor reception, while some isolated areas still depend on a single operator or have no dependable signal at all.

Upgraded mast locations 1 Lockerbie - Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale 2 Ettrick Valley - Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk 3 Ayrshire - Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock 4 Crosslee - Selkirk, Scottish Borders 5 Duns - Scottish Borders 6 Kelso - Roxburghshire 7 Lockerbie - Dumfries & Galloway 8 Campbeltown - Argyll and Bute 9 West Buccleuch - Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk 10 Acharacle - Argyll and Bute 11 Southend, Campbeltown - Argyll and Bute 12 A849, Isle of Mull - Argyll and Bute 13 Minor road from A848, near Salen, Isle of Mull 14 Brechin - Angus and Perthshire Glens 15 Forestry Track of A890 Strome Ferry near Kyle of Lochalsh - Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire 16 Bothwell Hill - Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk 17 Tundergarth - Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale 18 Girvan - South Ayrshire 19 Kirriemuir - Angus 20 Newton Stewart - Dumfries and Galloway 21 Duns - Lothian East 22 Land off B8007, Near Glenborrodale - Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber 23 Off B8083, Srathaird, near Elgol - Isle of Skye 24 Langburn Sheils, Hawick - Roxburghshire 25 Strathconnan - Muir of Ord 26 Camas-Luinie - Near Dornie 27 Lammermuir - Scottish Borders 28 Off B955, Kirriemuir - Angus, 29 Near Dykehead - Angus 30 Innerleithen - Scottish Borders 31 Tarskavaig - Isle of Skye 32 Near Heriot - Scottish Borders 33 Kinlochspelve - Isle of Mull 34 Southend, Campbeltown - Argyll & Bute 35 Land at Bunessan - Isle of Mull 36 Near Kingie, Glen Garry, PH35 4HS - Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire 37 Torrin - Isle of Skye 38 Isle of Jura - Argyll & Bute 39 Jedburgh, Roxburghshire 40 Isle of Jura, Argyll & Bute, 41 Strathcarron - Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire 42 Barr - Ayrshire 43 Kelsay - Isle of Islay 44 Newcastleton - Roxburghshire 45 Tarbert - Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber 46 Dukes Pass - Stirling 47 Loch Muick - West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine 48 Strathconon, Contin - Ross-shire 49 Sliderry, Arran - North Ayrshire 50 Branault, West Ardnamurchan Sources

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FEATURED | 12 July 2026

Mrs. Gunn's Not-So-Secret Garden

Read online: <https://modern.scot/mrs-gunns-not-so-secret-garden/>



There comes a point in every Highland garden when the gardener discovers she has mistaken tenancy for ownership. You may have bought the land, paid the solicitor, moved the stones, planted the trees, carried the compost and spent a perfectly good afternoon deciding whether the fuchsia was blocking the light from the verbenas. None of this establishes ownership. It merely informs nature that refreshments are available. The deer were the first to make this clear.

In early spring, I had searched everywhere for three old

Thurston August apple trees, the hardy sort said to endure winters that would discourage anything with less character. I had them brought up from England, then spent hours choosing their positions, shifting each pot a little to the left and then back again, as though the trees might one day complain about the view. Once planted, they were watered generously, tucked beneath straw and watched with the anxious devotion usually reserved for premature infants. I did everything but kiss them goodnight. I imagined blossom, fruit and, eventually, a pie of such distinction that visitors might speak of it quietly on the way home. The deer had a shorter plan. They ate bark and leaves. By morning my baby trees looked more like hat stands.

I tried netting, string, reflective objects and several devices sold online by people who plainly had never met a Highland deer. Each promised to frighten the animals away. The deer were not frightened. They were mildly interested. A deer will stand twenty feet from a flashing object, consider it carefully, and then return to eating my future pies.

Eventually, I installed web cameras with alarms. This seemed modern and decisive. The moment a deer approached, I would receive an alert, leap from bed, throw on a dressing gown and rush outside to defend the orchard. In my imagination, I was swift and commanding.

In practice, the cameras took photographs. They did not alert me.

Thus, while I slept peacefully, the deer continued their work and the cameras produced a detailed documentary record of my failure. By breakfast I could review the attack from several angles. There was the arrival. There was the first bite. There was the second deer joining in. In one photograph, a deer appeared to look directly into the lens. I felt mocked. There is something particularly insulting about technology that witnesses a crime, records it beautifully and waits for you to notice the evidence.

The spiders are more efficient. A deer requires access. A spider requires only that you place something upright. Put in a pole and a spider appears. Add a chair and there are three. Install a camera and by sunset it has become part of a regional spider transport network.

I do not know where they come from. I suspect they maintain lookout towers. There may not be a spider in sight for weeks, but the moment I add bamboo supports to the heirloom peas, they arrive as though alerted by miniature satellites hovering just above the roofline. Surely they work in teams. One runs the anchor line. Another handles tension. A third checks the prevailing wind. A fourth stands on a leaf with a tiny clipboard and

announces that the lavender section is behind schedule.

By morning the whole spider city is finished. On a dewy day, when the light catches the webs correctly, it is difficult not to admire them. Fine silver lines hang between the plants. Tiny droplets shine along every thread. An entire world appears where there was nothing the night before. The engineering is exquisite. The difficulty is that one generally discovers it by walking into it face first.

You cannot win with spiders. They own the corners, the shed, the gap beside the watering can and the path you use most often. Most offensively, they own the best seat on the swinging Adirondack love seat. Nobody sits there now. The web is too large and the spider occupies the centre with such confidence that one feels an appointment may be required.

Mr Gunn occasionally suggests removing it. I point out that this would merely create a vacancy. By evening another spider would move in, probably with dependants.

Recently, while having a bath, I decided to check the garden camera to see how the flowers looked under the moonlight. This sounds luxurious. It was not. Instead of flowers, the screen filled with a spider weaving a web directly across the camera lens.

There are experiences for which a person is not properly prepared.

The spider's legs filled the screen. Every movement was visible. It worked with terrible concentration, drawing one line after another across the lens. I watched in equal parts fascination and dread. Then flies began arriving. One hovered near the lower edge. Another landed briefly. The spider waited.

I spent the evening checking the camera and then regretting that I had checked the camera. I would put the screen down, tell myself not to look again, and pick it up two minutes later. The fly was still there. The spider was still there. I could not bear the suspense. Eventually, I stopped watching. There are limits to how long one can watch a spider hunt a fly before having an existential crisis.

By morning, the Highland wind had blown the whole arrangement away. The web was gone, the lens was clear and the flowers were still there. I, however, felt I had changed.

Still, deer and spiders at least make themselves known. The hardest battles are against creatures you cannot identify.

For weeks, something had been attacking the garden at night. Pots were overturned. Beetroot was pulled out. Leeks were uprooted. Holes appeared in the flower beds. The damage had the quality of a search. Some creature was looking for something and had decided that my vegetables were concealing it.

Every morning brought fresh evidence. A pot would be on its side. Soil would be scattered across the path. One particularly healthy leek was found several feet from where it had been planted, as though it had tried to leave.

I began to investigate. Perhaps it was a bird. Perhaps a cat. Perhaps a fox. Perhaps some small nocturnal animal known only to wildlife experts and people who have already lost all their onions. I installed another camera. The first camera had failed to identify the culprit. The second camera allowed us to fail from another angle.

Every morning I checked the footage. Nothing. Wind. Rain. A moth. Occasionally, my own dressing gown passing through the frame. I now had four cameras. The creature remained unseen. I moved two cameras to the flower bed, another to the pots and another towards the path. The result was an increasingly sophisticated

surveillance system recording absolutely nothing of value.

Mr Gunn would ask whether we had caught it.

“No,” I would say, “but we have excellent footage of the weeds that need pulling.”

Then one evening, after the curtains had been closed, there was a sound outside. Not a loud sound. A purposeful sound. Mr Gunn opened the curtains quickly.

There it was.

A pine marten had poked its head up from beside the giant pumpkin pot.

For a moment, none of us moved. It looked like a sea otter that had been blown inland during the last storm. Its face was round, its eyes were enormous and its expression suggested that we were interrupting something.

We stared at it. It stared at us.

There are animals one expects to see in a Highland garden. Birds. Deer. Rabbits. The occasional frog, even lizards. A pine marten feels different. It belongs in wildlife documentaries, moving silently through misty woodland while a solemn voice says, “Rarely seen by human eyes.”

This one was clearly considering climbing into my pumpkin pot. My hopes of American pumpkin pies flashed before my eyes.

But for several seconds, the moment was magical. Here was a beautiful, shy, elusive creature, one of the Highlands’ most secretive animals, looking directly at us from among the vegetables.

I looked down at the camera screen in my hand. The camera could barely see it. It wasn't even recording. The pine marten had repositioned itself outside the camera's view. It was not elusive at all. It understood surveillance.

Then it appeared to remember that this was its garden. It crossed the stones with the relaxed confidence of an owner inspecting premises. There was no panic and no attempt to flee. It moved with the quiet authority of someone checking work done by unreliable staff.

Then it climbed into the onion pot and began pulling everything out.

Not one onion escaped. Some were lifted. Some were tossed aside. Some were examined briefly. Mr Gunn and I stood at the window watching our produce being reorganised by management.

Having completed its inspection, the pine marten hopped onto the sheep wall, slipped behind the trees and disappeared into the night.

Weeks of surveillance, rearranged cameras, disturbed sleep and speculative discussion had finally produced an answer. The unknown creature had been identified. The elusive, shy, beautiful, almost mythical pine marten was, in fact, a little shite.

And so the garden remains under divided rule. The deer continue to contest the apple trees. The spiders have secured the furniture. The pine marten has taken the pots. The wind retains everything else.

I have the cameras.

They have yet to prove useful.

Modern Scot - Distinctly Scottish

LM Bruce, Editor lm@bruce.scot +44 (0)7888013333