



MODERN SCOT

Distinctly Scottish



ISSUE 08

30 JULY 2026

CONTENTS

Modern Scot - 30/07/2026

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT

Open Letter: Scotland Should Not Be Left Behind on Local News	1
---	---

COMMUNITY

Edinburgh's Official Statistical Portrait Leaves Crime And Homelessness Outside The Frame	6
---	---

HIGHLAND

Land Control Leads To £13.85m Highland Housing Award Without Open Competition	10
---	----

CITY OF EDINBURGH

Scottish Company Ooni Takes On Global Kitchen Appliance Giants	15
--	----

TRANSPORT

£1.52m Trial Will Test Whether Electric Aircraft Can Serve Highland And Island Routes	18
---	----

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT

The Children Who Leave Mull For School — And The Local Answer Scotland Has Not Yet Tested	21
---	----

ENERGY

Montrose Skills Academy Aims To Turn Offshore Wind Growth Into Local Careers	30
--	----

COMMUNITY

Aberdeenshire Restaurant Weeks Return For Third Year As Local Hospitality Campaign Continues To Grow	34
--	----

ENERGY

North Sea Kittiwake Platform Enters Final Phase After 36 Years	37
--	----

ECONOMY

Glasgow-Based Tech Consultancy Named Among UK's Best Workplaces For Women	41
---	----

ENVIRONMENT

What Will Happen To The Animals Caught In The Cairngorms Wildfire?	43
--	----

ENVIRONMENT

Kinghorn Faces Permanent Bathing Warning As Pollution Source Remains Unresolved	47
---	----

INFRASTRUCTURE

North Ayrshire Council Faces Transparency Questions Over £1.17m Data-Centre Deal	51
--	----

ENERGY

Ofgem Plans Tighter Controls On Dividends And Debt At Scotland's Energy Networks	56
--	----

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT

Scottish Local Government External Debt Budgeted To Rise By £3.2 Billion	61
--	----

ENVIRONMENT

Cairngorms Wildfire Declared Major Incident As Nethy Bridge Is Evacuated	65
--	----

ENVIRONMENT

Livingston Recycling Firm Secures £3.5 Million Public Grant For Plastics Technology	68
---	----

ENVIRONMENT

Balloch Castle Ash Shortlisted For UK Tree Of The Year After Surviving Storms, Disease And Crowds	72
---	----

COMMUNITY

Tributes Paid After Councillor Paul Henke Dies Aged 76	75
--	----

COMMUNITY

£27.8 Million Larkhall Leisure Centre Business Case Sent For City Deal Approval	78
---	----

COMMUNITY

Spanish Galleon Replica to Open its Decks at Ayr Harbour	82
--	----

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT

Shetland Sets Terms For Developers But New Charter Relies On Voluntary Cooperation	85
--	----

INFRASTRUCTURE

Scotland's Digital Identity System Runs on Amazon Cloud	89
---	----

HERITAGE AND ARTS

Scotland's Endangered Architecture Left Unmonitored For Two Years As Official At-Risk Register Remains Frozen	94
---	----

INFRASTRUCTURE

Scotland's Public-Sector AI Map Is Stored on Microsoft Cloud Outside Scotland	102
---	-----

TEA WITH GUNNS

The TARDIS Is Now Scotland's Most Reliable Form Of Public Transport	109
---	-----

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 29 July 2026

Open Letter: Scotland Should Not Be Left Behind on Local News

Read online: <https://modern.scot/open-letter-scotland-should-not-be-left-behind-on-local-news/>



Local news publishers from across Scotland are calling on the Scottish Government to introduce a Scottish Local News Fund, warning that Scotland risks being left behind while other parts of the UK invest in the future of local journalism.

By The Scottish Beacon

July 29, 2026

Local news is one of the foundations of a healthy democracy and strong communities.

It keeps people informed about the decisions that affect their daily lives, holds those in power to account, celebrates local achievements and gives communities a shared understanding of the places they call home.

At a time when public debate is increasingly shaped by polarisation, misinformation and social media algorithms that reward outrage over understanding, trusted local journalism has never been more important. Research suggests that communities with stronger local news are more resilient to misinformation and political division, while people who engage with local news feel more connected to their communities and less isolated.

Yet across Scotland, local news is under increasing pressure. Newsrooms have closed, journalists have been lost and many communities have seen a significant decline in local reporting.

This is not simply a challenge for the media industry. It is a challenge for Scotland's democracy, communities and civic life.

Through its recent Local Media Action Plan, the UK Government has recognised that local journalism deserves public investment, launching a new Local News Fund worth up to £12 million. However, because support for the press is a devolved matter, local news organisations in Scotland are excluded from the main funding programme. Welsh publishers can apply to the UK fund while also benefiting from a dedicated Welsh Government Local News Fund. Scotland has neither.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to work with the local news sector to deliver three practical measures. Add your name here.

1. Create a Scottish Local News Fund

Governments across the world are already recognising that local journalism is essential public infrastructure and journalism funds are becoming increasingly common. The UK Government has launched a Local News Fund worth up to £12 million to help sustain and innovate local journalism. However, Scottish publishers are excluded from applying in the first year because support for the press is a devolved responsibility. Meanwhile,

the Welsh Government has established its own £210,000 Local News Fund, while Welsh publishers are also eligible for the UK scheme.

Scotland should not be left behind.

If support for local journalism is a devolved responsibility, Scotland should establish its own Scottish Local News Fund to ensure Scottish publishers are not disadvantaged while equivalent support is available elsewhere in the UK. This could support public interest journalism, innovation and sustainability across Scotland's diverse local news sector, ensuring communities continue to have access to trusted local reporting.

2. Invest public advertising in local news

A meaningful proportion of Scottish Government and local authority advertising should be directed towards local news publishers, ensuring that public information reaches trusted local audiences while supporting the journalism that keeps communities informed. Internationally, New York City has adopted a policy that directs a significant proportion of its public advertising to community media, recognising that public spending should also strengthen local information ecosystems.

3. Invest in the next generation of local journalists

Scotland should create funded journalism placements that are accessible to local news organisations of all sizes, helping grow the workforce, diversify journalism and strengthen reporting in communities across the country. Canada's Local Journalism Initiative shows how targeted investment in journalism jobs can strengthen local reporting, particularly in underserved communities.

These are practical, achievable measures that would strengthen democracy, improve access to trusted information and help ensure every community in Scotland has access to high-quality local journalism.

Supporting local news is not simply an investment in journalism. It is an investment in stronger communities, better-informed citizens and a healthier democracy.

We urge the Scottish Government to seize this opportunity and work with the sector to develop a long-term strategy that secures the future of local news in Scotland.

If you believe Scotland's communities deserve strong local news, we invite you to add your name.

This open letter has been initiated by The Scottish Beacon and is open to anyone who believes local news is essential to Scotland's future.

If you're happy to be included, please sign here.

• Rhiannon J Davies, Founding Editor of Greater Govanhill Paul Fisher Cockburn, Editor, C&B News Alan McIntosh, Editor, Broughton Spurtle Sarah Ade, Editor, Glenkens Gazette & Doon Valley Gazette Phyllis Stephen, Founding Editor The Edinburgh Reporter and The Glasgow Reporter Jane Cruickshank, Founding Editor, The Bellman Hans J Marter, Owner and managing editor of Shetland News at www.shetnews.co.uk Juliana da Penha, Founding Editor and Director, Migrant Women Press Amanda Eleftheriades-Sherry, Founding Editor Clydesider magazine & Clydesider TV Phil Bowen, Owner and Founding Editor, MidlothianView.com and GlasgowView.com Julian Calvert, Founding Editor of The Lochside Press Silvia Muras, Founding Editor of Kyle Chronicle Lexie Kirkconnell-Kawana, Chief Executive, Impress Jonathan Heawood, Executive Director, Public Interest News Foundation Abba Kandalaft, Chair, Independent Media Association Paul Dobson, Investigative

Journalist / Director at The Ferret Catherine Happer, Professor and Director, Glasgow University Media Group, University of Glasgow Indra Adnan, Founder / co-initiator of The Alternative Global / Spring Rob Edwards, The Ferret Ellen Ormesher, Investigative Reporter, DeSmog Alex Airnes, UK Community Radio Network Katherine Sangster MSP for Scottish Labour Nick Addington Jacob Granger, community editor, JournalismUK Marcela Kunova, Managing director, JournalismUK Calum Grewar, Editor, The Glasgow Bell Osbert Lancaster, Podcaster, Thrivable Scotland Tina Marshall, Journalist and Energy Consultant, Irish Writers Union LM Bruce, Editor, Modern Scot Simon Sharkey, Director/CEO, The Necessary Space Mark Marcus, Editor, The Orcadian Leah Seator, Managing Director, Orkney Media Group Robert Sinclair Robertson, Chairman, The Orcadian Michael Russell, Editor West Highland Free Press Erin Rizzato Devlin, Investigative Journalist and Researcher Murray Dawson, Chief Executive, Station House Media Unit Louise Halkett, Journalism lecturer, City of Glasgow college Mairi Telford Jammeh, Community reporter, Eskdale & Liddesdale Advertiser Ian Pennell, Campaigner for better Regional TV in Northumberland and Scottish Borders, Look North Must Look North (Website) Simon Barrow, Scottish Public Interest Journalism Initiative Charlie McMillan, Director, Human Rights Consortium Jill Keegan, Programme & Partnerships Manager, Scottish Community Alliance Artemis Pana, National Coordinator, Scottish Rural Action Carron Tobin, Exec Director, SCOTO CIC – The Scottish Community Tourism Network Tracey Mills Ernie Watt James Miller Lesley Carruthers Christine Murdoch Zoe Greenfield Malcolm Brown Richard Soutar Clare Sander Graeme Pittillo Mary Macgregor Dr. Melissa Espinoza Leslie Sinclair Chris Holme Skye Renee Foley Kirsty Hall Julia Dall Linda Mabon Julie Lomax Martin Meteyard Alex McCulloch John Gordon Rosemary Macklin Peter Robinson Isla Whateley Victoria Sharratt

Sign the letter

Comments from supporters of the letter include:

The UK Government should be congratulated for finally putting forward money in support of local news. Much more still needs to be done though, including a similar fund for Scotland that would recognise the valuable work that is done by the growing sector of small independent news publishers – Hans J Marter, Owner & Managing Editor, Shetland News Local news and arts are our best opportunity to engage with global events as they occur in the places we live. If we can't see how climate, injustice and economic crises show up on our doorstep we disconnect and become passive. More local journalism (and arts) means more citizen agency. —

INDRA ADNAN, Founder / Co-initiator, The Alternative Global / Spring Local news is difficult to find in Scotland. BBC Scotland has a decreasing subscription and STV offers us 10mins of news each evening transiting to sport. Both unionist organisations have agenda and often miss positive news which would help our nation believe in itself again. — Kirsty Hall Power should be able to be held accountable so relevant and truthful information must be readily available. — Linda Mabon, Retired Teacher If we want true democracy, if we want the public to make informed choices and we want authorities and decision-makers in Scotland to be accountable, then we need high quality journalism to serve all of Scotland's communities, large or small, easily accessible or remote. — Gary Spinks, Founder and Journalist, Beyond Scotland I support a move towards locally funded news in Scotland because strong, community-rooted journalism ensures people have trustworthy reporting that reflects their lived realities and strengthens democratic accountability. — Dr. Melissa Espinoza Centralising Governmental decision-making, including at LA level, means affected communities are at risk of not spotting something that may affect them. People need a means of expressing their views so that others can be informed and so that local representatives can take these views forward to decision-making forums. — Archie Clark This is a basic requirement for any democratic society. — Clare Sander As news media is increasingly dominated by the politics of the billionaire owners, local news and journalism is more important than ever in order to provide grass roots perspective. — Graeme Pittillo A strong, independent, local media ecosystem is essential for people and nature to thrive. — Osbert Lancaster, Podcaster, Thrivable Scotland I wholeheartedly agree with the Scottish Beacon's calls to create a Scottish Local News Fund. In this moment of AI supercharged misinformation and political division, strong local journalism is desperately needed to keep communities informed and to foster a healthy information ecosystem. Scotland is already brimming with quality publications, journalistic talent, and eager readers. Support from the Scottish Government would enable the country's media to not just survive but thrive! — Ellen Ormesher, Investigative Reporter, DeSmog Locally owned journalism is key to creating communities that are cohesive and collaborative- an antidote to

misinformation and division spread by many mainstream outlets. The Scottish Government should invest in this as a practical, sustainable measure to support informed, democratic communities. — Jill Keegan, Scottish Community Alliance Local news is critical to the wellbeing, participation and sustainability of our rural and island communities. — Artemis Pana, Scottish Rural Action Local news needs urgent support in every corner of the UK – we are categorically stronger together and on a united front. — Jacob Granger, Community Editor, JournalismUK Community Radio can play a vital role independent news and journalism and we all need to be supported to provide such a vital service to communities across the country. — Alex Airnes, UK Community Radio Network A dedicated fund for Scottish local media is right and fair. It's a chance to show that devolution should bring positive change. — Marcela Kunova, Managing Director, JournalismUK Only an informed public can make sound democratic choices. A free, independent and active local press is democracy's first line of defence: it scrutinises power, tests official claims and gives citizens the facts they need to vote wisely. Scotland must invest in the journalism that keeps its communities informed and its institutions accountable. — LM Bruce, Editor, Modern Scot Local news reported by local news outlets are an essential part of community life. — Rosemary Macklin The need for truth and investigative journalism and granular local detail has never been greater. If we are to hold on to democracy and a sense of Belonging to something we call country then we must feel that truth intrinsically in the local because it connects us to the universal. In a world where truth, human and democracy are being challenged how else might we tell our stories and know our journey. — Simon Sharkey, Director/CEO, The Necessary Space I believe in local democracy, but that only works if there is robust local journalism. — Christine Murdoch, Local resident and reader of local news Totally agree with the sentiments of this letter. Knowledge is power and local knowledge empowers communities which is critical for a healthy, motivated, productive and compassionate civic society. — Richard Soutar The Orcadian has been informing, engaging and delivering trusted local journalism for 172 years. As Orkney's sole newspaper, with an established online and social media presence, we play a pivotal role in our island community. We hold authorities to account, provide a voice for our community and celebrate the achievements and successes of our community. However, there are significant challenges facing our industry. Misinformation, social media algorithms, the consumption of news digitally and falling traditional print advertising revenue means that our business model must evolve to sustain us for the future and to continue to serve the Orkney public. As a result, The Orcadian has significant and extensive innovative plans to grow digital subscriptions, engage with a younger demographic and maintain our valued print product. This represents the most significant innovation that this company has undertaken in the age of the internet, and will dramatically change our business model. The Local News Fund was a source of funding we had identified which would play a crucial role and assist us in our ambition to sustain trusted independent local journalism in Orkney for years to come. We were therefore dismayed and aghast that we, as a Scottish publisher, would not be eligible for this fund. We fully support the establishment of a Scottish fund, alongside the investment of public advertising in local news and breeding a new generation of local journalists. — Mark Harcus, Editor, The Orcadian We are very disappointed to be excluded from the Local News Fund, and believe staunchly that Scottish journalism should receive a similar level of support. As a local business at the centre of our community, preservation and modernisation of the services we offer are essential to ensure survival. We would welcome any initiative that helps us to bring our journalism (and historical records of such) to wider audiences, in an ever-changing and constantly evolving industry. — Leah Seator, Managing Director, Orkney Media Group Local news reporting definitely keeps our local community in Stonehaven continue to work together as a wonderful community and fantastic place to live. — Julie Lomax Trusted local journalism is essential to ensuring that communities can share their own stories, amplify lived experience and hold decision-makers to account. As local news provision continues to decline, including the loss of local television news capacity in the North East, Scotland needs a sustainable approach to supporting community radio, local television and independent community publishing, while creating opportunities for the next generation of local journalists. Investing in local news is an investment in stronger, more connected communities and a healthier democracy. — Murray Dawson, Chief Executive, Station House Media Unit There does need to be more promotion of, and funding for, local news which is a Public Service. It does indeed encourage democratic accountability. Regional TV is a case in point,

after STV axed its Northern Scotland regional news service, with OFCOM's blessing. Scotland is now the worst-served country for Local and Regional TV in Northern Europe – just 200 miles to the north-east of Shetland is Norway with ten state-funded Regional TV services – plus several privately-funded local TV services. This serves a country with just over 5.6 million folk. Scotland's population is similar, and what does Scotland have? BBC Reporting Scotland, BBC Alba and STV's News at Six (with a few cosmetic regional opt-outs). And a couple of You Tube Channels for the Hebrides and Orkney's respectively. This is terrible for local democracy and for communities to find out what is happening in their area and surrounding areas. I live just outside of Scotland, in rural North Cumbria, close to the border with Northumberland where similar issues around Regional TV cut-backs have resulted in poor local representation and coverage. The local TV service ITV Border Lookaround has been threatened with amalgamation in the past, and rural Northumberland is served by ITV News Tyne Tees and BBC Look North which does not provide local coverage. Folk in Northern Scotland will have their own feelings about losing their own Regional TV from STV- and the fact that it is now going to be mainly Scotland-wide. However, I know that North Northumbrians suffer the lack of local representation and here, in North Cumbria when the BBC and ITV have tried to remove/ change our local TV it has caused much consternation. Local TV and local media cannot be left solely to the Markets, directors cut costs and make decisions to protect their bottom lines so large rural areas with fewer people get little local news (or no local news-services). If local news for rural and Northern Scotland is to be protected there has to be some form of government funding (perhaps via an arms-length body to protect it from being pressurised by the governing party of the day to report favourably on the government). — Ian Pennell, Campaigner for Better Regional TV in Northumberland and the Scottish Borders, Look North Must Look North

SIGN THE LETTER

COMMUNITY | 29 July 2026

Edinburgh's Official Statistical Portrait Leaves Crime And Homelessness Outside The Frame

Read online: <https://modern.scot/edinburghs-official-statistical-portrait-leaves-crime-and-homelessness-outside-the-frame/>



The council's annual overview records Michelin restaurants, airport passengers and festival attendances. It omits crime entirely and leaves the capital's legal failures on homelessness in separate committee papers.

Edinburgh's latest official statistical portrait can tell residents that the city has 34 restaurants listed by Michelin, that its airport handled 15.8 million passengers and that major festivals recorded 3.91 million attendances.

It cannot tell them how much crime was recorded in the capital.

The 45-page Edinburgh by Numbers 2025 report contains sections on population, health, employment, the economy, tourism, education, property, the environment and transport. There is no section on crime or community safety. It provides no Edinburgh figures for violence, sexual offences, rape, shoplifting or antisocial behaviour.

That omission is more than a matter of editorial taste. The council describes Edinburgh by Numbers as an annual statistical overview and a starting point for obtaining a broad picture of how Edinburgh "lives, works and grows". The document is therefore intended to influence how residents, businesses and outside investors understand the city.

The picture it presents is largely favourable.

Edinburgh's population increased by 9.4 per cent between 2014 and 2024, reaching an estimated 530,680. Its employment rate among people aged 16 to 64 was 83.2 per cent, the highest among the major UK cities included in the council's comparison. Median hourly pay reached £20.49, also the highest among those cities outside London.

The city's gross value added reached £65,500 per resident in 2023. That is a measure of economic production divided by population, not the income received by each person. Edinburgh's finance and insurance sector generated £8.8 billion, exceeding the combined output of several other large parts of the local economy.

Tourism supplied another set of impressive figures. Edinburgh received approximately five million staying visits in 2024, while visitor spending was reported at £2.57 billion. Airport passenger numbers exceeded their pre-pandemic level, rising from 14.7 million in 2019 to 15.8 million in 2024.

These figures are legitimate measures of Edinburgh's economic strength. They do not, however, amount to a complete account of life in the city.

The latest Scottish Government statistics show that Police Scotland recorded 744 crimes for every 10,000

Edinburgh residents in 2025–26. That was the third-highest local-authority rate in Scotland, behind Dundee at 929 and Glasgow at 849, and considerably above the national rate of 569.

Recorded-crime rates require careful interpretation. They show crimes entered into police systems, not every crime committed, and the Scottish Government warns that many offences are never reported. A resident-population rate may also appear higher in a capital whose streets, venues and transport systems are used by large numbers of visitors and commuters who are not included in the population denominator.

Those qualifications are reasons to explain the figures, not reasons to omit them.

The absence of information about sexual crime is particularly conspicuous. Across Scotland, recorded sexual crimes rose by ten per cent in 2025–26, from 14,892 to 16,430. Recorded rape and attempted rape increased by 11 per cent, from 2,897 to 3,229. The Scottish Government notes that 26 per cent of sexual crimes were recorded at least one year after the alleged offence, so annual figures include both recent and historical reports.

Those are national figures and should not be presented as Edinburgh's local totals. The problem is that the council's statistical overview provides no Edinburgh total, rate or trend against which residents can assess the local position.

Policing is not controlled by the council, but that does not adequately explain the omission. Edinburgh by Numbers already draws upon data produced by the Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, tourism researchers, airport operators and other outside organisations. Police and Scottish Government statistics could have been treated in the same way.

The report's treatment of housing presents a similar difficulty.

Its property pages describe house prices, ownership, private renting, social housing and construction. The separate records of the council's homelessness service reveal a much more urgent part of the housing system.

In May, Edinburgh Council acknowledged that it was not complying with the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 or the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2014. These laws require councils to provide accommodation to qualifying homeless households and restrict the use of unsuitable temporary accommodation.

On 16 March 2026, the council had 9,331 open cases involving households assessed as homeless. Between April 2025 and February 2026, 3,605 households were assessed as homeless, an increase of 442, or 12.3 per cent, from the corresponding period.

A total of 971 households were living in accommodation officially classed as unsuitable. During February alone, the council recorded 614 failures to provide accommodation, affecting 259 households. Those failures represented 54.6 per cent of requests for temporary accommodation during the month.

The financial consequences have become substantial. Edinburgh's temporary-accommodation budget increased from £28 million in 2019–20 to £80 million in 2025–26. The council says it is developing a £1.6 billion housing and homelessness programme and has set March 2027 as its target for addressing failures to accommodate households and the use of unsuitable accommodation.

None of these figures appears in the annual statistical portrait.

The council does publish performance and committee reports separately, and its statistics page directs

readers elsewhere for information about its performance. That administrative separation may explain where the homelessness figures have been placed. It does not explain why a publication offering a broad picture of life in Edinburgh includes residential sales worth billions of pounds but not the number of households the council is legally failing to accommodate.

The account of business activity is less an omission than a matter of presentation.

The report uses the official statistical terms “business births” and “business deaths”. In ordinary language, these mean registered businesses beginning and ceasing operations. The report says Edinburgh has returned to positive business growth since the pandemic, but its explanatory text does not state the latest number of businesses that opened and closed.

A separate economic study commissioned by the council gives the figures more plainly. In 2023, 2,105 registered businesses started operating in Edinburgh and 1,970 ceased operating, leaving 135 more openings than closures.

That was still a weaker position than five years earlier. The number of businesses starting in 2023 was 17.5 per cent lower than in 2018, while the number ceasing operations was 0.8 per cent higher. The figures exclude unregistered enterprises and do not reveal why each business closed. They cannot establish how many were forced out by insolvency, rent, redevelopment or reduced trading, and how many closed voluntarily.

A useful annual account would provide the plain totals, compare them with previous years and identify which sectors and parts of the city are gaining or losing businesses. Saying only that growth has returned conceals the fact that Edinburgh was producing substantially fewer new registered businesses than in 2018.

The festivals page creates a different kind of uncertainty.

Edinburgh by Numbers describes 3.91 million “attendees” at the city’s major festivals in 2024. The heading immediately above the figure describes online and in-person “attendances”. These are not the same thing. One person attending six performances creates six attendances but remains one attendee.

Festivals Edinburgh records 3,914,838 attendances in 2024, up from 3,447,973 in 2023. It estimates that those attendances represented 851,052 individual people, but that figure was calculated by applying an assumed average of 4.6 attendances per person derived from earlier audience research. It is an estimate, not a separate count of 851,052 visitors.

The council report does not provide a consistent year-on-year measure of pedestrian footfall during the festivals. It therefore cannot show whether more people were walking through Princes Street, George Street, the Royal Mile or local commercial districts, nor whether increasing festival attendance translated into increased visits to ordinary shops and businesses.

Festival admissions, unique visitors, city-centre footfall and spending are four different measurements. A public statistical report should not allow them to blur into one large and agreeable number.

Edinburgh is not a city whose economic achievements need to be invented. It has high employment, strong pay, major financial industries, exceptional international connections and an enormous cultural reach.

A credible civic portrait would be strengthened rather than diminished by placing the harder figures beside them.

The twentieth edition of Edinburgh by Numbers should include a community-safety section, Edinburgh-specific crime trends, straightforward figures for businesses opening and ceasing operations,

comparable event-period footfall and the principal measures of homelessness and statutory housing compliance.

A reader should not have to leave the council's broad statistical overview and locate a separate committee paper to discover that the same authority is failing to meet two of its basic legal duties towards homeless households.

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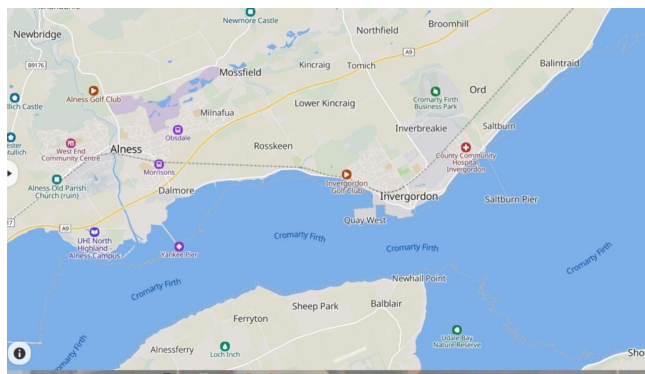
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HIGHLAND | 29 July 2026

Land Control Leads To £13.85m Highland Housing Award Without Open Competition

Read online: <https://modern.scot/land-control-leads-to-13-85m-highland-housing-award-without-open-competition/>



Highland Council says competitive tendering for 52 homes at Rosskeen would duplicate work and threaten funding deadlines. Its planning reports and procurement notice, however, give conflicting accounts of who owned the land.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

- **No Competition:** Public tax money was handed directly to one company, meaning nobody else had a fair shot at the work.
- **The Confusion:** In 2025, the council officially claimed that they already bought the land. But now in 2026, they claim Capstone owns the land, and they are using that ownership as the exact excuse to skip the competition. Both cannot be true.
- **Two Different Companies:** The company that asked for permission to build is technically a different legal business than the company that got the £13.85 million contract, even though they share the exact same address.
- **Chopping Down Trees:** Local neighbours and woodland charities tried to stop this project because it will destroy local trees and nature spaces.
- **Information:** The council got into trouble twice with the official information watchdog for failing to give honest answers when people asked for documents about this site.

Highland Council has published notice of a £13,846,869.91 housing contract with Capstone Construction Scotland Ltd without an open call for competition.

The development at Rosskeen, near Invergowrie, is intended to provide 52 homes with associated infrastructure. The contract covers 22 units described as being for rent, 12 LIFT units and 18 for mid-market rent. Its stated value excludes VAT.

The procurement notice gives 22 July 2026 as the date the contract was concluded and identifies Capstone Construction Scotland as the contractor. Elsewhere in the same document, however, Highland Council says it

“intends” to award the design-and-build contract directly. The notice, published on 28 July, does not explain the difference between those descriptions.

The council says Capstone Construction is the current owner of the site and has been involved in the early development of the proposals.

According to the notice, the land is not available to the market separately from the existing development scheme. The design, infrastructure and layout are described as closely integrated with the landowner’s proposals and delivery model.

Highland Council says separating the construction work and placing it out to tender would duplicate design and technical work, require parts of the development to be procured again, cause delays incompatible with funding requirements and risk making the scheme unviable.

It concluded that there was limited scope for effective competition and that the contract could, in practice, be delivered within the required terms only by the supplier controlling the site and the associated development arrangements.

Highland Council’s own published records provide a different account of the land ownership at an earlier stage.

A planning report presented to councillors in January 2025 stated that the site had “since been purchased by the council”. It linked the reported purchase to a decision to increase the affordable element of the development to 49 homes, with a further 17 intended for private let.

The same report said Highland Council was committed to beginning development in April 2025.

Eighteen months later, the procurement notice described Capstone Construction as the current owner and said the site remained under the control of a single private landowner.

The documents do not explain whether Highland Council completed the reported purchase and later disposed of the land, whether the January 2025 report referred to a conditional or incomplete acquisition, or whether one of the official descriptions is wrong.

That distinction is consequential. Capstone’s ownership is now being used as the principal reason why the £13.85 million construction contract could not be offered through an open competition.

Two separate Capstone companies also appear in the records.

The planning application was made by Capstone Connect Ltd, company number SC712701. The construction contract is recorded in the name of Capstone Construction Scotland Ltd, company number SC224032.

They are separate legal entities, although both are registered at the same address in Henderson Road, Inverness. The planning papers identify Capstone Connect as the applicant, while the procurement notice attributes current ownership and the construction contract to Capstone Construction Scotland.

The development itself has been contested since before planning permission was granted.

Capstone Connect applied in November 2023 for permission to construct 66 homes, comprising flats and houses with roads, drainage, services, recreation areas and retained woodland.

Highland Council’s North Planning Applications Committee agreed in April 2024 to grant permission, subject to the completion of a legal agreement. Before that agreement was concluded and a final decision issued, the

council adopted a replacement Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan in June 2024.

Under the new plan, most of the site was no longer allocated for housing and lay outside the Invergordon settlement development boundary. Planning officers acknowledged that the proposal did not comply fully with the replacement local plan or with parts of National Planning Framework 4.

They concluded that the departure was outweighed by demand for housing, the council's housing programme and anticipated employment growth associated with the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport.

The court judgment records that 135 representations had been received through the public participation process by the time of the April 2024 planning report. That figure represents all recorded representations and should not be read as 135 individual objections.

The organised opposition included neighbouring resident Richard Cross, the Woodland Trust and Save Our Green Space, a local campaign chaired by Cross.

Their objections focused on the proposed removal of trees, possible deterioration of ancient woodland, effects on veteran trees and an alleged conflict with Policy 6 of National Planning Framework 4, which governs woodland, ancient woodland and veteran trees.

Cross submitted objections on several occasions between January 2024 and January 2025. The Woodland Trust submitted objections in December 2023 and February 2025, while Save Our Green Space lodged its own objection on 10 March 2025, shortly before the committee reconsidered the application.

At the March 2025 meeting, Councillor Tamala Collier moved to refuse planning permission.

Her motion argued that the biodiversity baseline survey had been carried out in temperatures of minus 2 degrees and during ice cover, making the results unreliable. It also alleged that the development had failed adequately to assess effects on irreplaceable habitats, ancient woodland soils and biodiversity.

Those were the grounds advanced in Councillor Collier's motion, not independent findings subsequently upheld by a court. Her motion received no seconder.

Conditional planning permission was issued on 19 March 2025.

Cross then asked the Court of Session to overturn the decision. He argued that the approval was unreasonable or irrational, that relevant considerations had not been properly taken into account and that councillors had not received sufficient information to make an informed decision.

Lord Menzies rejected the judicial-review petition in February 2026.

The judge found that a substantial body of material about trees, forestry and ancient woodland had been placed before the committee. He concluded that the planning officer had been entitled to reach her assessment and that her advice was neither perverse nor seriously misleading.

The ruling did not find that no trees would be removed. Lord Menzies accepted that some individual trees and groups of trees would have to be felled. He was not persuaded, however, that this amounted to the legal loss of ancient woodland, meaning land that has maintained continuous woodland habitat since at least 1750. He also said there was no suggestion that ancient or veteran trees themselves would be lost.

The judgment settled the challenge to the legality of the planning permission. It did not examine the subsequent procurement method, the construction price or the ownership account contained in the 2026 contract notice.

Separate findings were made about Highland Council's handling of requests for information concerning the development.

In March 2025, the Scottish Information Commissioner found that the council had failed to answer an information request and a later request for review within the statutory timescales. Highland Council acknowledged that the material had not initially been collated correctly and that parts of the request had not been addressed.

A second decision, issued in December 2025, found that the council should have handled the requested planning records under the Environmental Information Regulations rather than solely through freedom-of-information legislation.

The Commissioner also found that Highland Council had not provided enough evidence to support its assertion that it held no further relevant information. It was ordered to carry out fresh and proportionate searches and issue a new decision based on the results.

Those decisions concerned access to information and the adequacy of the council's searches. They did not overturn the planning permission. They do show that attempts to examine the development's records encountered failures that were formally upheld by the information regulator.

The procurement notice does not provide a breakdown separating the cost of the houses from land, design, roads, drainage and other infrastructure. It includes no independent valuation and no construction-cost comparison showing how the negotiated price was tested without competing tenders.

The total is equivalent to approximately £266,286 for each of the 52 contracted homes before VAT. That is not the construction cost of an individual house because the contract includes associated infrastructure and development work. A public cost breakdown would show what is included in the figure.

There is also an unexplained difference between the planning permission and the contract.

Planning permission covers 66 homes. The January 2025 report described 49 affordable homes and 17 for private let. The July 2026 procurement notice covers 52 homes under a different tenure arrangement.

It does not say what will happen to the remaining 14 consented homes, whether they will be delivered through a separate phase or whether the development has been reduced.

The award provides a practical example of the land-control issue examined in Modern Scot's earlier investigation into more than 230 proposed Highland development sites. That analysis found that ownership and option agreements can shape the choices available long before a construction contract reaches the public record.

Highland Council's need to deliver housing quickly may justify an accelerated timetable. The authority estimates that 24,000 homes could be required across the Highlands within ten years, roughly twice the previous rate of construction.

It does not remove the requirement to demonstrate how a negotiated price of almost £13.85 million represents value for money.

The council cites programme and funding requirements as reasons why a competitive exercise would cause unacceptable delay. The procurement notice does not identify the funding deadline, the amount at risk or the source of all the money involved.

Nor does it reconcile its assertion that Capstone Construction owns the land with the planning report stating that Highland Council had purchased it.

The land title, acquisition records, negotiated cost breakdown and arrangements for the other 14 homes are needed before the public can determine how the council reached a position in which one contractor was considered the only possible supplier.

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CITY OF EDINBURGH | 29 July 2026

Scottish Company Ooni Takes On Global Kitchen Appliance Giants

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scottish-company-ooni-takes-on-global-kitchen-appliance-giants/>



The Edinburgh-headquartered business began with a portable pizza oven and a £17,000 crowdfunding campaign. Its latest product, developed as Ooni attempts to expand beyond outdoor cooking, will compete directly with some of the oldest names in domestic kitchen equipment.

A Scottish company that created an international market for portable pizza ovens is preparing to take on the established giants of the home-appliance industry with a new dough mixer developed for ordinary

domestic kitchens.

Ooni will release its Halo Core Spiral Mixer on 4 August, priced at £499 in the UK. The machine is intended to bring the rotating-bowl mixing systems normally found in professional bakeries and pizzerias into the home.

The launch is being presented internationally from Edinburgh. The company has its global headquarters and principal product-development operation in Scotland. Ooni Park in Broxburn, West Lothian, is used for product development, while its second Scottish office at Edinburgh Park supports the wider business. Its international operations include regional headquarters in the United States, Germany, Australia and China.

Ooni employs more than 220 people worldwide and remains privately owned rather than controlled by a multinational appliance conglomerate. Its controlling company, Magic Foundry Limited, is incorporated in Scotland and registered at Ooni Park in Broxburn. Companies House records show that Magic Foundry holds more than half of the shares in Ooni Limited, at least 75 per cent of its voting rights and the power to appoint or remove directors.

The operating company itself was incorporated in 2012 and is registered in England and Wales, with an accounting address in Kent. Its ownership, headquarters, product-development functions and senior creative operations, however, remain centred in Scotland.

That makes the Halo Core more than a new kitchen appliance. It is the latest attempt by a Scottish-designed consumer brand to compete in a global market generally dominated by large American, European and Asian manufacturers.

Ooni was founded by husband-and-wife team Kristian Tapaninaho and Darina Garland. Tapaninaho, who is Finnish, began developing a portable oven after finding that an ordinary domestic cooker could not reach the temperatures needed for Neapolitan-style pizza. Garland was raised in Edinburgh, where the company later established its headquarters.

The pair launched the original product, then called Uuni, through Kickstarter in November 2012. The campaign raised approximately £17,000 in advance orders. What began as a small portable wood-fired oven developed

into an international business selling gas, multi-fuel and electric ovens around the world.

Ooni says it has now sold more than three million ovens globally. The company's rise was unusually rapid, particularly during the pandemic, when restrictions increased demand for outdoor cooking equipment. Annual sales reached £208 million in 2021 before falling as the temporary home-cooking boom subsided.

By 2024, annual sales had declined to approximately £120 million. Ooni cut jobs, brought in outside management and began broadening its range beyond outdoor pizza ovens. The company returned to more modest sales growth and profit during 2025.

The Halo Core therefore arrives at a consequential point in Ooni's development.

Ooni entered the mixer market in 2025 with the larger £699 Halo Pro. The new Halo Core is a smaller and less expensive model intended to reach home bakers who may not require the capacity or controls of the professional-style machine.

The mixer has a 4.5-litre bowl and can prepare enough dough for between two and ten 12-inch pizzas. Ooni says it is 25 per cent smaller and 30 per cent lighter than the Halo Pro, although it can still mix more than six pounds, or approximately 2.7 kilograms, of dough.

Its principal difference from a conventional stand mixer is the way the dough moves.

Most familiar domestic mixers use a stationary bowl while the attachment travels around it in what is called a planetary motion. In the Halo Core, the bowl rotates while a spiral hook and central breaker bar work through the dough together.

The intended effect is to stretch and fold the dough more evenly, encouraging gluten development without generating as much heat. Spiral mixers have long been used in commercial bakeries, where dough may need to be mixed repeatedly and for longer periods.

The Halo Core uses two motors and offers 20 speed settings between 60 and 300 revolutions per minute. Motor protection can automatically adjust its speed during demanding mixes to reduce the risk of overheating.

It also includes a geared whisk, silicone-edged beater, splash guard, proofing lid and removable breaker bar. The attachments allow the machine to prepare cake mixtures, icing and meringue as well as bread and pizza dough.

Tapaninaho said traditional stand mixers were not designed principally for kneading dough and could stall, overheat or fail to develop it evenly.

"With Ooni Halo Core, we've engineered a solution that fits on your counter but refuses to compromise on performance," he said. "We are making professional-grade spiral mixing technology the new domestic standard."

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TRANSPORT | 29 July 2026

£1.52m Trial Will Test Whether Electric Aircraft Can Serve Highland And Island Routes

Read online: <https://modern.scot/1-52m-trial-will-test-whether-electric-aircraft-can-serve-highland-and-island-routes/>



Project SEAN is a three-month government-funded test of electric flying from Inverness Airport. It will examine whether a small battery-powered aircraft, charging equipment and existing airports could eventually support passenger, freight and medical flights across northern Scotland.

A small electric aircraft will spend three months flying between airports in the Highlands and Islands during 2027 as part of a £2.1 million trial funded largely by the

UK Government.

The trial is called Project SEAN, an abbreviation of Scottish Electric Aviation Network.

It is not a new airline or a permanent passenger service. Instead, Project SEAN will test whether electric aircraft could eventually become part of Scotland's regional transport network, particularly on short routes serving remote communities.

Flights will operate from a base at Inverness Airport and connect with selected Scottish regional airports. Wick John O'Groats Airport is the first destination to have been publicly confirmed.

The project will run for three months in 2027. It will test the aircraft in realistic operating conditions while examining how long it takes to recharge, how much electricity airports would require and whether existing airport facilities are ready for regular electric flights.

The aircraft may be used to simulate passenger, freight and medical-service journeys.

The UK Department for Transport is providing £1,522,896 towards the project's total cost of £2,125,155. That leaves £602,259 to be provided by the project partners or from other sources.

Bristow Helicopters will lead the consortium carrying out the work. Bristow is an aviation company with extensive experience in helicopter transport, offshore operations and government aviation services.

The other partners are American aircraft manufacturer BETA Technologies, Highlands and Islands Airports Limited, the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership, Electric Aviation Maven and Skyparts Infrastructure.

Highlands and Islands Airports Limited operates Inverness, Wick and nine other airports, including Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh, Benbecula, Barra, Islay and Tiree. HITRANS is the regional transport partnership covering much of the Highlands and Islands.

Together, the organisations will study the practical elements required to turn an electric aircraft demonstration into a working transport service.

These include identifying suitable routes, assessing passenger and freight demand, planning flights, training pilots, satisfying aviation regulators and determining whether airports have sufficient electricity supplies to recharge aircraft repeatedly.

The programme will use BETA Technologies' ALIA CX300, a battery-powered aircraft that takes off and lands on an ordinary runway. In principle, it could operate from airports that already serve Highland and island communities.

BETA says the passenger version can carry five passengers. The manufacturer lists a maximum demonstrated range of 336 nautical miles and an optimised charging time of approximately 35 minutes.

Those are manufacturer figures rather than guaranteed results for a scheduled Scottish service.

The usable range of any electric aircraft will depend on the weather, wind, battery temperature, cabin heating, passenger load and the amount of reserve energy required in case the aircraft must divert to another airport.

Charging time will also depend on the equipment and electricity supply available at each location. An airport may be able to recharge one demonstration aircraft without possessing the grid capacity needed to support several commercial flights each day.

This is one reason the project involves more than flying an aircraft from Inverness to Wick.

The ALIA CX300 has already completed demonstration flights across Scotland. During a ten-day programme in March 2026, the aircraft made 23 flights around the UK, including journeys involving Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Inverness, Wick and Kirkwall.

That earlier programme was conducted with Loganair and Royal Mail. It examined electric aircraft operations on routes used for regional travel and postal deliveries.

Project SEAN must therefore establish more than whether the plane can physically reach a Highland airport. That question has largely been answered.

The new programme is intended to examine whether an electric aircraft can operate repeatedly within a properly planned network and what Scotland would have to build, buy and maintain before regular services could begin.

Loganair is separately preparing for that possibility.

On 20 July 2026, three days before Project SEAN was announced, Loganair said it had signed a term sheet to purchase five ALIA CX300 aircraft, with options for five more.

The airline said it expected the aircraft to support passenger and freight operations from 2029, subject to certification and final commercial arrangements.

Loganair is not listed as a member of the Project SEAN consortium. Project SEAN should not therefore be described as a Loganair project or as the formal introduction of electric aircraft into Loganair's fleet.

The two developments are nevertheless connected. They involve the same aircraft, many of the same airports and the same central question: whether electric flying can work economically on Scotland's short regional routes.

Loganair says most of its regional flights are shorter than 100 miles, placing many within the intended

operating range of the CX300.

The airline also says the aircraft could be recharged in 20 to 40 minutes using BETA's fast-charging system.

Loganair chief executive Luke Farajallah has claimed that the aircraft showed the potential to reduce operating costs by as much as 80 per cent.

That is an airline claim, not a finding produced by Project SEAN. The trial has not yet begun and cannot have produced conclusions about costs, charging performance or commercial viability.

The published material does not provide a detailed independent calculation supporting the 80 per cent figure.

It is therefore unclear whether it covers only electricity and direct aircraft maintenance or also includes the full cost of buying or leasing aircraft, installing chargers, strengthening electricity connections, replacing batteries, training staff and maintaining reserve aircraft when an electric plane is unavailable.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 27 July 2026

The Children Who Leave Mull For School — And The Local Answer Scotland Has Not Yet Tested

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-children-who-leave-mull-for-school-and-the-local-answer-scotland-has-not-yet-tested/>



Almost one in five secondary-age pupils across Mull, Iona and Ulva attend school on the mainland. Many live in an Oban hostel from Monday to Friday. The system can be traced to the closure of Bunessan's secondary department in 1968, while the proposed £46.8 million Tobermory campus would leave it substantially unchanged. Scotland already possesses the technology and teaching network required to give younger pupils another choice.

On Monday mornings, children from southern Mull leave their family homes to attend secondary school across the sea.

Their school is Oban High School on the Scottish mainland. Those who cannot reasonably travel each day can be accommodated at Glencruitten Hostel, where most pupils from Mull, Iona and several other remote communities stay from Monday until Friday and return home for the weekend.

Oban High School is not formally a boarding school. The hostel is a separate council-run establishment described as school care accommodation. For the children involved, the distinction is largely administrative. They pack for the week, leave their homes and live under the care of other adults until Friday.

Argyll and Bute Council's transport review identified 193 secondary-age pupils across Mull, Iona and Ulva during the 2024–25 school year. Of those, 157 attended Tobermory High School on Mull and 36 children living on Mull or Iona attended Oban High School on the mainland.

Almost one secondary-age child in every five was therefore being educated off-island.

The same report found that 22 per cent of the wider pupil population lived within the Oban High School catchment: eight per cent around Bunessan, seven per cent around Fionnphort and seven per cent on Iona. The figure of 36 does not prove that every one of those children stays in the hostel, but it establishes the scale of the population for whom the island's existing secondary school is not the designated school.

Scotland is now preparing to spend an estimated £46.8 million on a new school campus on Mull. Yet the project, as presently constituted, would not bring secondary education any closer to the children of southern Mull. It would replace the existing school in Tobermory while preserving the catchment system that sends them to Oban.

The country is preparing to build for the next generation without resolving an arrangement inherited from the last century.

A Decision Made In 1968

Bunessan, in the Ross of Mull, once provided secondary education.

Its secondary department closed in 1968, when only six pupils remained. A Highlands and Islands Development Board study published in 1975 recorded that the department had provided a limited curriculum, consisting principally of craft and homecraft subjects.

The same report said that discussion in Argyll had already begun about creating a larger secondary school on Mull where all island pupils could complete at least their first four secondary years. The problem now being presented as an unfortunate but settled consequence of geography was therefore recognised more than half a century ago.

After Bunessan lost its secondary department, Oban became the established destination for children from the south-west of Mull. Hostel provision made the system operationally possible. Over time, an arrangement created when remote teaching barely extended beyond correspondence courses became accepted as the ordinary provision for generations of children.

The present pupils did not choose that history. Their parents did not design it. It is the accumulated result of school consolidation, limited local provision and a funding system that has treated hostel accommodation as an adequate answer to distance.

The technology available in 1968 could not bring a mathematics teacher, a Gaelic specialist or a modern-languages lesson into a small island classroom. The technology available in 2026 can.

Understanding The Islands

Tobermory is in the north of Mull and is the island's largest settlement. Its existing campus provides nursery, primary and secondary education.

Craignure lies nearer the centre of Mull and contains the principal ferry terminal for Oban. Bunessan and Fionnphort are in the Ross of Mull, considerably farther south-west.

Iona is a separate island beyond Fionnphort. A child travelling from Iona to Oban must cross by ferry to Fionnphort, travel by road across Mull to Craignure and take another ferry to the mainland.

Children do not ordinarily undertake that entire journey in both directions every school day. The number of stages, distance, weather exposure and dependence on connecting services help explain why hostel accommodation exists.

The position of Iona is also different from that of southern Mull. When councillors decided in December 2024 to proceed with a single campus, they recorded the unanimous view of the Iona community that it should be removed from the scope of the project. In practice, Iona wished to retain its established connection with Oban rather than send pupils on a long daily journey to a school elsewhere on Mull.

That decision should be respected. Some Iona families value the breadth of education and activities available in Oban and prefer weekly residence there to a demanding daily journey involving a ferry and a long road crossing.

Respecting Iona's choice does not require the same arrangement to be imposed upon Bunessan and Fionnphort. Their geography is different. Their children are already on Mull. A local or central provision could allow at least some of them to return home every afternoon.

There need not be one compulsory solution for every island child. A sound rural education system should be capable of accommodating more than one route.

What The New Campus Will Provide

The existing Tobermory campus needs replacement. It has been rated category C, or poor, for suitability, with identified shortcomings including accessibility, restricted specialist classrooms, inadequate social areas and constrained drop-off space. A modern building would provide substantial benefits to the children who attend it.

The project was admitted to the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Investment Programme as a replacement for the existing Tobermory 2–18 campus. That means nursery, primary and secondary provision are being treated as one establishment.

Argyll and Bute Council selected Tobermory South as its preferred location in March 2025. The council says 84 per cent of secondary-age children on Mull live within the existing Tobermory High School catchment and estimates that retaining the campus in Mull's largest settlement would produce £3.1 million more economic benefit than locating it centrally.

Those are legitimate considerations. Tobermory's nursery and primary pupils should not be casually displaced from their own community, and a major school is an important source of employment and activity.

The financial position has become increasingly difficult. The project budget agreed in April 2024 was £42.9 million. The council set aside another £7 million in February 2026 for future school provision on Mull, while the current forecast for the campus has reached £46.8 million. The council attributes more than £946,000 in additional inflationary pressure to the pause associated with the judicial review. Subject to further approvals, the campus is projected to open in late 2030.

A statutory consultation is scheduled to run from 24 August until 2 October 2026. Its formal subject is the relocation of the existing Tobermory 2–18 campus to a new building at Tobermory South. It is not a consultation on whether Bunessan should regain secondary provision, whether the Oban catchment should change or whether a smaller southern facility should be established.

The process may refine the building. It does not, by itself, reconsider the education system around it.

How The Choice Became Narrower

Many residents supported a split-site approach: nursery and primary education would remain in Tobermory, while the secondary school would be placed nearer the centre of Mull.

The council rejected that model in December 2024 after considering educational benefits, funding conditions and advice from its chief financial officer that a two-site project would be unaffordable. From that point, the project proceeded on the basis of one combined 2–18 campus on one site.

That decision shaped everything that followed. Later appraisals were chiefly concerned with selecting a location for the combined campus. They were not an unrestricted examination of every possible way of educating children across the island.

Mull Community Council conducted a survey in early 2025 that received 665 responses, equivalent to about one fifth of Mull's population, although approximately ten per cent came from people who did not live on Mull or its surrounding islands. Sixty-three per cent supported some form of split-site arrangement. Where only one

combined campus was available, Tobermory was preferred.

The survey was self-selecting and was not a binding referendum. It does, however, show that many islanders favoured an option that had already fallen outside the council's agreed project structure.

The Mull Campus Working Group later challenged the site-selection process in the Court of Session. Lord Cubie dismissed the petition on 18 February 2026, finding no legal basis to overturn the council's decision on the grounds presented.

The ruling did not establish that Tobermory was the best educational solution. Lord Cubie stated at the beginning of his judgment that judicial review examines the lawfulness of a decision, rather than whether it was "right or wrong". The case also did not challenge the earlier December 2024 decision to proceed with a single campus.

By 18 March 2026, the council had spent £118,698 on legal fees connected with the case, according to figures obtained by the Local Democracy Reporting Service. That expenditure settled whether the site decision had been lawfully made. It did not create another classroom or give southern Mull children a new educational choice.

What Scottish Law Permits

Scottish law does not guarantee every child a school within a particular distance of home.

The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 allows an education authority to overcome distance through transport, boarding-school accommodation, a hostel or other board-and-lodging arrangements. The law can therefore regard education as having been provided even where a child cannot attend it daily from the family home.

That statutory structure helps explain how the Mull arrangement has survived for decades. The availability of hostel accommodation makes it possible for the authority to meet its educational duties without operating a secondary school in southern Mull.

Parents may home educate in Scotland. Where a child already attends a council school, the parent normally requires the authority's consent to remove the child from the roll, and that consent must not be unreasonably withheld. Consent is not normally required where a child has completed primary school but has not yet begun secondary school.

Home education could allow an individual child to remain with their family. It does not amount to publicly provided local secondary education. Once the child is withdrawn, the parent assumes responsibility for delivering the education, and the authority is not legally required to provide teaching resources, examination arrangements or funding.

A legal escape route for parents is not an adequate island education policy. Families should not have to choose between sending an 11-year-old away during the week and personally reconstructing a secondary school at the kitchen table.

The Human-Rights Warning

Documents released by the Scottish Government on 27 July 2026 show that Professor Katie Boyle, Chair of Human Rights Law and Social Justice at the University of Strathclyde, wrote to officials in December 2025 about the Mull arrangements.

Professor Boyle described what she believed to be a live issue involving the right to education and private and

family life. She raised possible implications under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Convention on Human Rights and equality duties, including children's rights to be heard, to participate in cultural life and to maintain family relationships. She described her most pressing concern as the "constructed nature" of boarding outside the family home.

Her intervention was an expert legal warning, not a judgment that Argyll and Bute Council had acted unlawfully. She expressly stated that the factual account supplied to her came from the Mull Campus Working Group and had not been independently determined or tested against every party's evidence.

The Court of Session did not decide those wider human-rights questions. They were not among the grounds argued in the judicial review.

The Scottish Government says its officials have taken appropriate legal advice on the wider matter, although that advice has not been published. It also says the human-rights explainer connected with the dispute has been discussed internally, and that lessons from Mull and other island projects will inform the successor to the Learning Estate Investment Programme. The former education secretary also wrote to the council encouraging stronger engagement with the Mull community.

There is no evidence that Glencruitten Hostel staff created this policy or that they systematically mistreat the pupils in their care. Staff may provide a safe, compassionate and professionally run environment.

A well-run hostel is still not a family home.

The question is not whether adults at the hostel work hard. It is whether weekly separation should remain the state's ordinary educational provision for children from one part of Mull when a less intrusive local model may now be possible.

Gaelic Is More Than A School Subject

The published records do not state how many of the 36 Mull and Iona pupils attending Oban High School speak Gaelic or have received Gaelic-medium education. It would be inaccurate to describe them all as Gaelic speakers.

There is, however, an established Gaelic educational community in the affected area. Bunessan Primary provides Gaelic-medium education for southern Mull and Iona, while Salen provides Gaelic-medium education in the north. Oban High School offers Gaelic-medium secondary provision and qualifications through to Advanced Higher.

Argyll and Bute Council's own integrated impact assessment concluded that opportunities for Gaelic could be enhanced by bringing together Gaelic-speaking cohorts from Bunessan and Salen in a central secondary school. The same assessment recorded concerns that children boarding in Oban can have less opportunity to participate in cultural, sporting and community activities on Mull during the week.

The availability of Gaelic lessons in Oban is valuable. It does not entirely answer the cultural question.

Gaelic survives through its use between generations, within families and during the ordinary life of a community. It lives in conversation, music, place names, local work, worship, sport and social gatherings. A language cannot be protected solely by ensuring that it appears on a timetable after its young speakers have left the community for most of the week.

No evidence presently establishes that boarding has caused a measurable decline in Gaelic use among these particular children. The absence of a published language breakdown makes the effect difficult to assess. That

information should have been part of the public evidence from the beginning.

If Scotland is serious about maintaining Gaelic as a living community language, its education planning must consider where Gaelic-speaking children spend their lives, not merely where they sit their examinations.

The Smaller Alternative Raised And Then Overlooked

The public debate has been framed chiefly as a choice between a large combined campus at Tobermory and an expensive split-campus development.

A third option was visible in the council's records as early as 2022.

During pre-engagement, someone asked whether a junior secondary school could help very young pupils who otherwise had to leave home at 11. The recorded council response was simply that the funding application had been made for a 2–18 campus.

Children also asked whether a school could be provided on Mull that they could attend each day and whether they could study without leaving their brothers and sisters. Elsewhere in the same engagement, a participant asked whether a hybrid model could allow secondary pupils to be educated in the Ross of Mull. The council acknowledged that digital technology could deliver teaching to different sites.

The public record reviewed for this article contains no separate feasibility study for a small S1–S2 centre at Bunessan. There is no published staffing plan, capital estimate, curriculum model or comparison with the continuing costs of pupil transport and hostel accommodation.

The suggestion appears to have been absorbed into a project whose funding and scope had already been defined around replacing the Tobermory campus.

That omission now deserves particular scrutiny because Scotland already operates the teaching system that could make such a centre viable.

Scotland Has Already Built The Digital School

E-Sgoil was established in the Western Isles to help small and remote schools obtain specialist teaching that could not always be recruited locally.

It now provides live, interactive lessons delivered by General Teaching Council for Scotland-registered specialist teachers. Its programmes cover the 3–18 curriculum and include Gaelic-medium education. During 2024–25, E-Sgoil delivered specialist supply teaching into three of the Western Isles' four secondary schools, while most of the area's primary schools received online teaching in Gaelic and English.

This is not a collection of children left alone with laptops. It is live teaching by qualified subject specialists, integrated into the work of local schools.

The Scottish Government's 2026 review of online education recognised that face-to-face education has social, emotional and collaborative benefits that cannot be replaced. It also found that well-designed online learning can widen access, improve resilience and complement provision in schools, particularly where geography or staffing restricts subject choice.

That is precisely the balance required in southern Mull: a real local school environment supported by remote specialist teaching, rather than either a full conventional secondary school or education conducted entirely from home.

A Bunessan Junior Secondary Learning Centre

A workable proposal would be a Bunessan Junior Secondary Learning Centre, providing S1 and S2 education for children in southern Mull who wished to remain at home.

It would not need to reproduce every facility and department of a six-year high school. Nor would it be a literal one-room schoolhouse with one teacher expected to know French, physics, Gaelic, algebra and the proper maintenance of a Bunsen burner before lunch.

The centre could operate from an extension to Bunessan Primary, a small neighbouring building or a purpose-designed modular facility. It would have a locally based, GTCS-registered teacher responsible for daily learning, pastoral care and coordination, supported by appropriate classroom and pupil-support staff.

Specialist subjects could be taught live through E-Sgoil by qualified teachers elsewhere in Scotland. Visiting teachers could provide practical instruction, while planned blocks at Tobermory or Oban could give pupils access to laboratories, technical workshops, larger sports facilities and other equipment that would be disproportionate to reproduce for a small cohort.

The centre could preserve continuity for children who have received Gaelic-medium primary education. Gaelic-speaking pupils from Bunessan could remain together, with remote and visiting specialists helping to extend the language into secondary subjects rather than forcing the cohort to disperse at the end of primary school.

The arrangement need not be compulsory. Families who prefer Oban High School and hostel accommodation could retain that option. Iona could remain connected to Oban, as its community requested. Children from southern Mull who wished to stay locally could attend Bunessan for the broad general education provided during S1 and S2.

At S3, when subject specialisation and preparation for national qualifications become more demanding, pupils could transfer to Tobermory, Oban or another agreed pathway. By then, they would be older, their educational needs clearer and their families able to make a more informed choice.

The model would require proper examination. Pupil numbers, staffing, additional-support provision, safeguarding, broadband resilience, school meals, transport within the Ross of Mull, practical subjects, peer contact and costs would all need to be assessed.

Those are reasons to conduct a feasibility study. They are not reasons to refuse to conduct one.

A small centre may prove too expensive, although that cannot be known without costing it. It may suit some children and not others. It may require a partnership among Argyll and Bute Council, E-Sgoil, the Scottish Government and the principal secondary school.

Public authorities routinely resolve more complicated matters when they decide the matter deserves resolution.

Before The Future Is Set In Concrete

The proposed Tobermory campus can provide an excellent new school for the children it is designed to serve. Southern Mull should not be required to oppose a good school in Tobermory merely to secure an education for its own children.

The mistake lies in treating the two needs as though one must cancel the other.

A modern campus can be built at Tobermory while a modest junior secondary centre is established at Buessan. Iona can retain its chosen route to Oban. E-Sgoil can provide specialist teaching that a small centre could never recruit alone. Gaelic pupils can remain within their community during the first years of secondary school. Families can be given genuine choices rather than administrative alternatives that are technically available but practically impossible.

The technology exists. The qualified teaching network exists. The local primary school and Gaelic cohort exist. The proposal itself has appeared in the council's engagement records.

What is missing is a published assessment bringing those pieces together.

Scotland is considering £46.8 million for the principal campus. Argyll and Bute Council has already spent almost £119,000 defending its site-selection process. Before a system inherited from 1968 is embedded for further generations, a small fraction of that attention should be directed towards determining what it would cost to keep the youngest southern Mull pupils at home.

Children should not have to demonstrate exceptional resilience merely to make an education funding formula function neatly.

Gaelic should not be preserved as a classroom subject while the young people who may carry it forward are dispersed from the communities in which it lives.

A Buessan junior secondary centre may not answer every difficulty created by the geography of Mull and Iona. It is, however, a credible Scottish solution built from methods Scotland already uses.

It deserves to be designed, costed and judged on evidence before another generation is told that leaving home is simply the price of growing up on an island.

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ENERGY | 27 July 2026

Montrose Skills Academy Aims To Turn Offshore Wind Growth Into Local Careers

Read online: <https://modern.scot/montrose-skills-academy-aims-to-turn-offshore-wind-growth-into-local-careers/>



A £1.25 million public investment will help convert part of Montrose Port's restored Customs House into a specialist training centre, bringing offshore-wind education closer to the turbines, vessels and maintenance teams already operating from the harbour.

A new Offshore Skills Academy at Montrose Port is moving towards delivery after receiving approval for £1.25 million from the Tay Cities Industrial Investment Programme.

The Montrose Port Skills Academy will occupy the

ground floor of the B-listed Customs House at North Quay, where Dundee and Angus College plans to provide technical training for people entering the renewable-energy industry and workers moving from other sectors.

The funding will pay for the academy's internal fit-out and training equipment. Montrose Port Authority will remain responsible for the wider cost of the project, construction procurement and management of the site. Angus Council is not making a direct capital contribution.

The decision places the training centre inside a working harbour that is already becoming closely associated with offshore wind.

Seagreen, Scotland's largest operating offshore wind farm, has its operations and maintenance base at Montrose. The purpose-built facility supports the day-to-day running of the 114-turbine project and is expected to remain in use throughout the wind farm's 25-year operational phase.

Inch Cape, which is under construction in the North Sea, is also expected to be operated and maintained from Montrose. The presence of both developments has strengthened the case for providing specialist training within the port rather than requiring learners and employers to rely entirely on facilities elsewhere.

The academy is intended to connect those developments more directly with the workforce in Angus and the wider Tay Cities region.

Dundee and Angus College has worked with employers to identify the equipment, qualifications and practical disciplines needed. Proposed facilities include a teaching area and workshop capable of supporting mechanical, electrical and hydraulic training, as well as flexible space for companies to deliver courses tailored to their own maintenance teams.

The college has already developed a wind-turbine technician curriculum with Vestas, supported by Scottish Government funding. Inch Cape Offshore has agreed to provide equipment for skills development and a

renewable-energy education kit for work with schools.

Vestas has also selected the academy as the base for an apprenticeship programme due to begin through Dundee and Angus College in August 2026. The turbine manufacturer supplies the machines used at Seagreen and will be closely involved in maintaining them during the project's operational life.

The first learners are already undertaking specialised Vestas-accredited courses, meaning the training partnership has begun before the permanent facility is fully fitted out.

For Montrose, the development is about more than providing another college classroom.

The port has spent several years positioning itself as a long-term operations and maintenance centre for offshore wind. These activities can offer greater continuity than the more temporary work associated with constructing a wind farm, because turbines require technicians, marine crews, coordinators, engineers and support services throughout their operating lives.

Seagreen's operations base includes offices, marine-control facilities, vessel access and communications infrastructure. A service operations vessel contracted for 15 years carries technicians between the port and the offshore turbines, while maintenance activity is coordinated from Montrose.

Placing the academy alongside that activity should allow learners to train closer to the working environment they hope to enter. It could also make it easier for employers to shape courses around real equipment, safety requirements and changing technical needs.

Tom Hutchison, chief executive of Montrose Port Authority, said the port wanted local people to benefit from energy projects operating from the harbour.

"With major wind farm operations based at our port, we want to make sure local people are benefitting from the jobs and opportunities that are right on our doorstep," he said.

"The Skills Academy is central to that ambition, creating pathways for local school leavers and career changers into sustainable, long-term jobs in offshore wind while helping to develop the skilled workforce that Scotland's rapidly growing renewables sector needs."

The project also gives a new purpose to one of the port's historic buildings.

Montrose Port Authority acquired the 19th-century Customs House and neighbouring Granary Store in 2023. Restoration work began the following year as part of a self-funded, multi-million-pound programme intended to preserve the building while creating modern commercial and community space.

Montrose-based Pert Bruce Construction and Adam & Gordon Architects were appointed to the project, with local subcontractors involved in making the building wind and watertight. The upper floors are intended for offshore-wind businesses, while the publicly supported academy will occupy the ground floor.

The location brings together three strands of local development: the reuse of a listed maritime building, the expansion of renewable-energy activity at the harbour and the creation of routes into technical employment.

Councillor George Meechan, chairman of the Tay Cities Region Deal Joint Committee, said the investment would help meet the cost of the ground-floor fit-out and support local employment connected with renewable energy.

Dundee and Angus College vice-principal Julie Grace said the academy would provide technical and safety qualifications alongside more specialised training for offshore operations and maintenance.

She said the college had worked with employers and industry partners to align the training with actual demand, creating routes for school leavers, people seeking to develop their existing skills and workers moving from other parts of the energy industry.

That last group is likely to become increasingly relevant as Scotland's offshore economy changes.

Many skills developed in oil and gas — including electrical maintenance, hydraulics, mechanical engineering, marine operations and working safely offshore — can transfer into renewable energy. The transition is not automatic, however. Workers may need different qualifications, turbine-specific instruction or evidence that their previous experience meets the requirements of offshore-wind employers.

A locally based academy could reduce some of those barriers, particularly for people who cannot easily travel to training centres farther away.

The public funding originated in a £50 million Scottish Government industrial investment package associated with the Tay Cities Region Deal. The £1.25 million allocated to Angus was originally intended to support low-carbon industrial units at the Zero Four site in Montrose, but the project was delayed and the money was reassigned to the skills academy.

Council documents identify the academy's intended benefits as higher-value employment, improved local earnings and a larger share of offshore-wind economic activity remaining within Angus. They also recognise the normal risks attached to the project, including construction delays, higher costs, weaker-than-expected demand for courses and changing conditions in the offshore-wind market.

Those risks do not weaken the case for training. They show why the relationship with employers will be central to the academy's success.

A specialist facility cannot create offshore jobs by itself. Its value will depend on whether the courses remain connected to real vacancies, whether employers recruit locally and whether learners can move from training into paid work.

The involvement of Vestas, Seagreen and Inch Cape gives the project a stronger starting point than a training programme developed without committed industry partners.

Montrose already hosts the infrastructure used to manage one major wind farm and is preparing for another. The academy is an attempt to ensure that the workforce serving those projects can increasingly be trained in the same town.

For Angus, that is the practical opportunity behind the investment: turning renewable-energy activity visible from the harbour into careers that can be entered and sustained by people living nearby.

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COMMUNITY | 27 July 2026

Aberdeenshire Restaurant Weeks Return For Third Year As Local Hospitality Campaign Continues To Grow

Read online: <https://modern.scot/aberdeenshire-restaurant-weeks-return-for-third-year-as-local-hospitality-campaign-continues-to-grow/>



A council-backed initiative encouraging people to dine locally will return this November after attracting a record number of participating businesses last year and helping introduce diners to new cafés, restaurants and hotels across Aberdeenshire.

Aberdeenshire Restaurant Weeks will take place from 2 to 15 November, offering diners special menus, discounts and exclusive offers at participating venues throughout the region.

The event, organised by Aberdeenshire Council, has grown steadily since its launch in 2024. What began as a

one-week pilot has developed into a two-week celebration of local food and drink, with participation rising from 75 businesses in its first year to 77 venues in 2025. More than a third of those taking part last year were new to the campaign.

Hospitality businesses are now being invited to register for the 2026 event, which aims to encourage residents and visitors to explore Aberdeenshire's cafés, restaurants, hotels and pubs during November, traditionally one of the quieter periods for the sector.

The initiative is part of the council's wider efforts to support local businesses and encourage more spending within Aberdeenshire's towns and communities.

Early results suggest the campaign has succeeded in raising awareness of the area's food and drink offering.

Following the inaugural event in 2024, customer surveys found that 85 per cent of respondents rated the range of participating venues as good or excellent. More than half said Restaurant Weeks encouraged them to try somewhere they had never visited before or travel to another part of Aberdeenshire, while almost a third said they also spent money with other local businesses during their trip.

The event website attracted more than 30,000 visits, with hundreds of people signing up to receive future updates.

Individual businesses also reported positive experiences.

Aspire Restaurant in Portsoy said demand was strong enough for its Restaurant Week menu to be extended after the event, while the Garlogie Inn reported welcoming both new and returning customers throughout the promotion. Other participating venues described the campaign as an opportunity to introduce their business to diners who might otherwise never have visited.

The 2025 event expanded to a full fortnight, giving customers more time to visit multiple venues across the region.

Feedback gathered afterwards suggests many appreciated the longer format, saying it made it easier to fit visits around work and family commitments while encouraging them to explore different parts of Aberdeenshire.

Customers also offered constructive suggestions for the future. Some called for participating menus to be published earlier, while others said they would welcome more vegetarian and vegan options, additional family-friendly offers and greater participation in areas where relatively few venues took part.

Several respondents suggested introducing another Restaurant Week at a different time of year, while others said the November event had become an enjoyable annual tradition.

Councillor Alan Turner, chair of Aberdeenshire Council's Infrastructure Services Committee, said the growing number of participating businesses reflected the strength and diversity of the region's hospitality sector.

"We're delighted to welcome Aberdeenshire Restaurant Weeks back for a third year following the tremendous success of the previous two events," he said.

"Each year has seen more restaurants, cafés and hotels getting involved, helping to showcase the incredible quality and diversity of food and drink experiences available across Aberdeenshire."

He encouraged hospitality businesses from across the region to register, describing the event as an opportunity to attract new customers during a quieter trading period while celebrating local food and drink.

Although the council says participating businesses reported increased footfall and strong weekend trading during last year's event, it has not published an overall assessment of the programme's economic impact across the region.

Even so, participation continues to grow, businesses are returning for another year and customer feedback suggests the campaign is helping more people discover the variety of independent hospitality venues that Aberdeenshire has to offer.

Businesses wishing to participate can register by emailing restaurantweek@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.

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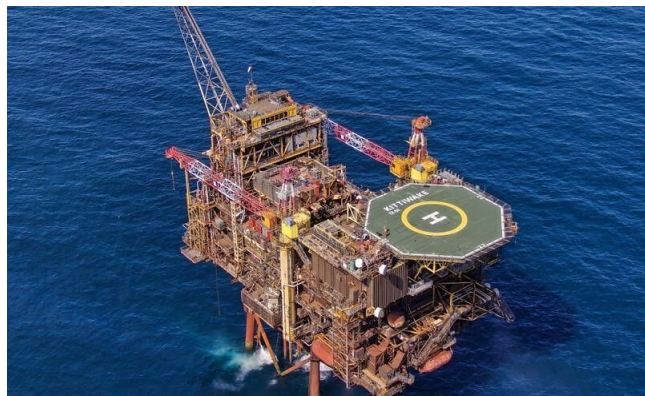
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ENERGY | 27 July 2026

North Sea Kittiwake Platform Enters Final Phase After 36 Years

Read online: <https://modern.scot/north-sea-kittiwake-platform-enters-final-phase-after-36-years/>



A long-serving North Sea production hub is moving towards shutdown and decommissioning, opening another chapter in the industrial transition facing Aberdeen as ageing oil infrastructure reaches the end of its working life.

The Kittiwake platform, which has produced and processed oil in the central North Sea since 1990, is being prepared for the end of production and eventual decommissioning.

EnQuest has extended the contract of CB&I Asset Solutions to continue managing the installation as duty holder through cessation of production and into the decommissioning phase.

The agreement confirms that Kittiwake is moving beyond routine late-life production management and towards permanent closure, although EnQuest has not published a final cessation date or a detailed timetable for dismantling the platform and its associated infrastructure.

Located in Block 21/18 of the UK Continental Shelf, Kittiwake has operated for 36 years and forms the centre of the Greater Kittiwake Area, a network of mature oil fields and subsea developments east of Aberdeen.

The original Kittiwake field began production in 1990. As its output declined, the platform was retained as a processing hub for nearby fields, allowing smaller discoveries to use existing pipelines and facilities rather than requiring new standalone installations.

The Greater Kittiwake Area comprises the Kittiwake, Mallard, Gadwall, Goosander and Grouse fields. The Scolty and Crathes developments were also tied back to the platform, extending its useful operating life.

EnQuest owns a 50 per cent operated interest in the Greater Kittiwake Area. Dana Petroleum holds the remaining interest in the principal fields, while historic owners retain responsibilities connected with parts of the eventual decommissioning programme.

Production has continued to decline as the reservoirs have matured.

Average output from the Greater Kittiwake Area fell to 1,825 barrels of oil equivalent per day in 2025, compared with 2,009 barrels per day in 2024 and 2,412 in 2023. EnQuest attributed the performance partly to natural decline, while reporting production efficiency of 75 per cent during 2025.

At that level, Kittiwake remains operational but contributes only a small part of EnQuest's wider production portfolio. The economics of keeping an ageing offshore platform running become increasingly difficult as output falls while maintenance, staffing, safety and integrity costs continue.

CB&I Asset Solutions will remain responsible for the safe day-to-day management of the installation during that transition.

An offshore duty holder is responsible for controlling major accident risks and ensuring that an installation's safety systems, operating procedures and workforce arrangements comply with regulatory requirements. That responsibility continues as production is reduced, systems are shut down and the platform is made ready for decommissioning.

The contractor's team has worked on Kittiwake since 2003 under a succession of owners and operators, including Venture Production, Centrica and EnQuest.

CB&I says the platform has operated for more than 20 years without a lost-time incident. The company attributes that record to the continuity of the offshore crew and its supporting team in Aberdeen.

John Pearson, chief operating officer of CB&I Asset Solutions, said the company had acted as outsourced duty holder for almost 23 years.

"Whilst bittersweet to anticipate the end of life of the asset, we are honoured to support EnQuest during this final phase," he said.

EnQuest asset manager John Telford said the contractor had demonstrated strong operational performance and detailed knowledge of the platform over more than two decades.

The workforce will now be responsible for a phase in which offshore risk can remain substantial even after oil production stops.

Cessation of production does not mean that an installation can simply be abandoned or immediately demolished. Wells must be isolated and permanently plugged, pipelines flushed or disconnected, hydrocarbons and hazardous materials removed, and machinery and structural systems maintained until removal or an approved alternative treatment is completed.

Formal decommissioning programmes must be submitted to and approved by the UK Government. These documents normally set out what will be removed, what may remain in place, the proposed timetable, environmental assessments, waste handling and arrangements for monitoring the site after work is completed.

A full decommissioning programme covering the Kittiwake platform and the remaining Greater Kittiwake Area infrastructure has yet to appear on the government's register of approved offshore programmes.

EnQuest's role in the closure was expanded in August 2024, when Shell transferred its remaining decommissioning management responsibility for the Kittiwake platform and Mallard field to EnQuest.

Shell had retained that role after selling its interests in the area. EnQuest was subsequently appointed to manage the full Greater Kittiwake Area decommissioning scope on behalf of the joint venture.

The financial responsibility for decommissioning can remain divided among current and former owners under agreements and statutory notices established over the life of an oil field.

Historic Kittiwake decommissioning documents identify Shell, Dana and the operator of the time as parties responsible for parts of the infrastructure. EnQuest acquired its 50 per cent interest in the Greater Kittiwake Area from Centrica in 2014.

The total cost of closing the area has not been made public.

Kittiwake will, however, become part of an offshore decommissioning programme of exceptional scale.

The North Sea Transition Authority estimates that approximately £44 billion remains to be spent decommissioning oil and gas infrastructure across the UK Continental Shelf. About £27 billion is expected to be spent between 2023 and 2032, while plugging and abandoning wells is forecast to account for close to half of the total cost.

That expenditure is often described as an opportunity for Aberdeen and the Scottish supply chain. The work requires offshore engineers, vessel operators, inspection teams, environmental specialists, well-service companies, ports, dismantling yards and waste-management businesses.

The opportunity is not automatic.

Decommissioning work can be awarded internationally, and recovered structures may be taken to facilities outside Scotland. Engineering and project-management activity can also be undertaken elsewhere even when the installation itself is managed from Aberdeen.

Neither EnQuest nor CB&I has identified where the platform will ultimately be dismantled, which ports will support the work or how many jobs will be sustained through the project.

Those decisions will determine how much of Kittiwake's remaining economic value is retained in Scotland.

Decommissioning also differs fundamentally from production. An operating field can support recurring employment, supply contracts and tax receipts over many years. Decommissioning creates intense periods of specialised work, but the activity ends once the wells are plugged and the infrastructure has been removed or made permanently safe.

The public finances are also involved.

Offshore companies can offset qualifying decommissioning expenditure against taxes paid on North Sea profits. HM Revenue and Customs reported a provision of £5.8 billion for expected petroleum revenue tax and offshore corporation tax repayments to companies through to 2067 because of decommissioning losses. That figure covers the UK sector as a whole rather than Kittiwake alone.

The cost and efficiency of individual projects therefore affect both company liabilities and future tax repayments.

Kittiwake's final phase is also unfolding after a significant change in the ownership of the contractor responsible for the platform.

The Asset Solutions business was previously part of Petrofac. CB&I completed its acquisition of the division on 9 April 2026, adding offshore operations, maintenance, wells and decommissioning services to its existing engineering and storage business.

The Kittiwake extension demonstrates continuity for the former Petrofac team, but it also places another part of the Aberdeen offshore-services industry under the control of a US company owned by a consortium of financial investors led by Mason Capital Management.

For Aberdeen, the essential question is no longer whether North Sea decommissioning will grow. The scale of ageing infrastructure makes that inevitable.

The question is whether the city and the wider Scottish economy will retain the engineering expertise, physical work, contracts and industrial capacity created by the closure of assets that were managed from

Scotland throughout much of their productive lives.

Kittiwake has survived changing owners, declining reservoirs, new subsea connections and the corporate collapse that preceded the sale of Petrofac's Asset Solutions business.

Its final years will now show whether continuity of experience can deliver a safe and controlled closure — and whether the industrial value of that work remains close to the communities and workforce that supported the platform for more than three decades.

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ECONOMY | 27 July 2026

Glasgow-Based Tech Consultancy Named Among UK's Best Workplaces For Women

Read online: <https://modern.scot/glasgow-based-tech-consultancy-named-among-uks-best-workplaces-for-women/>



A technology consultancy that chose Glasgow for its first European headquarters has been recognised as one of the UK's Best Workplaces for Women, highlighting the city's growing role in attracting international professional services businesses.

Invisors, a Workday consulting firm with its European headquarters in Glasgow, has been ranked 65th in the 2026 UK's Best Workplaces for Women list published by workplace culture organisation Great Place To Work UK.

The recognition comes three years after the American

company established its first European office in Glasgow, selecting the city as the base for its UK operations and graduate recruitment programme. At the time, the company said Glasgow's technology talent, universities and business support had influenced its decision to expand into Scotland.

Unlike many corporate awards judged by a panel, Great Place To Work's annual rankings are based primarily on confidential employee surveys. The organisation says this year's workplace lists drew on feedback from around 285,000 employees across the UK, alongside assessments of workforce representation and workplace policies.

The women's rankings recognise organisations where female employees report positive workplace experiences and where employers demonstrate efforts to remove barriers to career progression.

Jennifer Donnelly-Corbett, EMEA Manager for HCM and Absence at Invisors, said the award reflected "the culture we've built together—one that values inclusivity, flexibility and empowerment."

Great Place To Work UK Managing Director Benedict Gautrey said the organisations recognised had created environments where women felt "supported, valued, and able to grow," adding that employee feedback showed such workplaces often demonstrated greater resilience and stronger organisational performance.

Founded in the United States, Invisors specialises in implementing and supporting Workday, the cloud software platform used by organisations to manage human resources, payroll and financial operations. The company provides consulting services to businesses introducing or expanding their use of the platform.

The firm's Scottish presence dates back to 2023, when it announced Glasgow as the location for its first European office. Working with Invest Glasgow, Scottish Development International and Skills Development Scotland, the company said the office would support clients across Europe while serving as the centre of its graduate development programme.

The latest recognition represents another milestone for that investment, although the company has not

disclosed how many people it currently employs in Glasgow or elsewhere in Scotland.

While Great Place To Work's methodology relies heavily on employee feedback rather than independent workplace audits, it differs from promotional awards by requiring participating organisations to achieve certification before becoming eligible for the annual rankings. The process includes confidential surveys assessing trust, fairness, respect and opportunities for development.

The published results, however, do not provide detailed information about individual organisations' gender pay gaps, promotion rates, senior leadership representation or staff retention. As a result, the award should be viewed as evidence of employees' reported workplace experience rather than a comprehensive assessment of every aspect of workplace equality.

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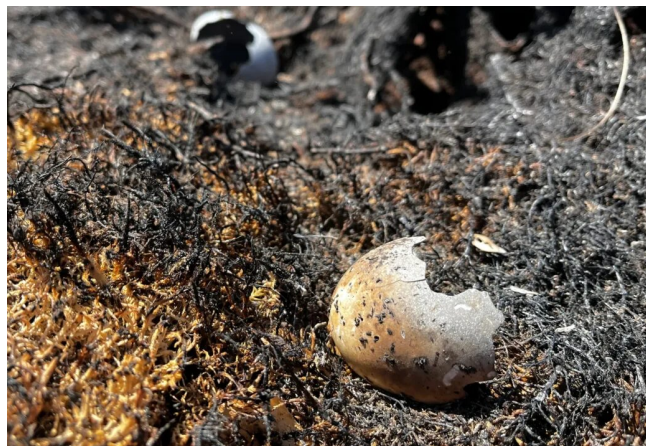
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ENVIRONMENT | 27 July 2026

What Will Happen To The Animals Caught In The Cairngorms Wildfire?

Read online: <https://modern.scot/what-will-happen-to-the-animals-caught-in-the-cairngorms-wildfire/>



Some will have escaped. Others could not. As firefighters continue working across Glenmore and Abernethy, the true cost to wildlife remains hidden beneath smoke, ash and ground that is still too dangerous to enter.

The Cairngorms wildfire began on 15 July and has affected about ten square kilometres across Glenmore and Abernethy. Firefighters, conservation workers, estate staff, gamekeepers, volunteers and helicopter crews have spent days trying to contain it, protect nearby communities and prevent further damage to one

of Scotland's most precious natural landscapes.

No reliable wildlife casualty count has yet been produced.

The fireground remains dangerous. Hotspots can continue burning beneath vegetation, roots and peat long after visible flames have diminished. Heavy machinery and helicopters are still operating, and conservation teams cannot safely walk across the full affected area to search for nests, injured animals or carcasses.

The RSPB has already reported finding charred eggshells at Abernethy. The fire arrived during the breeding season, when the woodland and moorland contained eggs, nestlings, fledglings and dependent young that could not respond as healthy adult animals might.

Some Animals Will Have Escaped

Many adult birds and mammals will have moved away from the fire.

Deer, foxes, pine martens and other mobile mammals can travel ahead of advancing flames when they have warning and a clear route. Adult birds can fly from smoke and heat. Red squirrels may move through the canopy or descend and run towards unburned woodland.

Within the wider fire area, damp ground, burns, changes in wind and natural breaks in the vegetation may also have left pockets of habitat untouched. These small refuges could have provided shelter while the fire moved around them.

Escape, however, is not the same as safety.

Animals fleeing fire may suffer burns, smoke inhalation, exhaustion and dehydration. They can be driven across roads, separated from their young or forced into unfamiliar territory already occupied by other animals. They may survive the fire itself but lose the places where they fed, sheltered and bred.

An adult bird may escape while its nest does not.

A pine marten may reach safety while the den it used is destroyed.

A red squirrel may find another stand of trees but lose the familiar routes and food sources that sustained it.

The Smallest Animals Faced The Greatest Danger

The most vulnerable animals are likely to have been those that were young, slow-moving, hidden underground or unable to travel far.

Eggs and nestlings could not flee. Recently fledged birds may not yet have been strong enough to fly beyond the smoke. Young mammals may have remained inside dens or dreys while their mothers escaped or tried to return to them.

Voles, mice, amphibians, reptiles, insects and caterpillars would have had few options.

Some may have survived beneath stones, in deep burrows, wet hollows or areas where the fire passed lightly. Burrows can offer protection from surface flames, but they are not certain refuges. Heat can penetrate the soil. Smoke can enter underground spaces. Oxygen can fall, and roots or peat may continue burning beneath the surface.

Adders, common lizards and slow-worms need time and a safe route to move. Many insects and larvae cannot move quickly enough to escape at all.

These smaller lives are often absent from the early accounting after a wildfire, yet they form the foundation of the habitat. Birds depend on insects. Predators depend on small mammals. Plants depend on pollinators and the creatures that move seeds through the landscape.

Their loss travels through the food chain long after the flames have gone.

Why Capercaillie Are A Particular Concern

Abernethy is one of Scotland's remaining strongholds for the capercaillie, a species whose future is already fragile.

Capercaillie nest on the ground. Their eggs and chicks are therefore exposed to fast-moving fire, while young birds depend heavily on insects and the blueberry-rich forest floor for food and cover.

Even where adult birds escaped, the fire may have destroyed nests, chicks, vegetation and insect life.

There is not yet enough evidence to say how many capercaillie were affected. It would be wrong to declare the population devastated before surveys have been carried out. It would be equally wrong to assume that the birds emerged unharmed.

The same caution applies to crested tits, Scottish crossbills, ospreys, red squirrels, pine martens and the thousands of other species found across Abernethy.

The reserve supports more than 5,000 species. Its value does not lie only in the animals whose names are familiar. It lies in the relationship between old pine trees, young woodland, heath, wet ground, fungi, lichens, insects, birds and mammals.

A forest is not simply a group of trees standing together.

It is a living arrangement built over generations.

What Recovery May Look Like

The fire will not have burned every part of the landscape with the same intensity.

In some places, flames may have moved quickly across the surface, leaving roots and deeper soil intact. Grasses and heather can begin to recover comparatively quickly after lower-severity fire. Birds may return as soon as the smoke clears, and mobile mammals may move back into surviving woodland.

Other areas may take far longer.

Old trees can be lost in minutes and require generations to replace. Deeply burned peat, ancient woodland structures and the dense ground vegetation used by insects and young birds cannot simply be restored by planting saplings.

The first green shoots should not be mistaken for full recovery.

A hillside may appear green again while the nests, fungi, insects, feeding routes and shelter that once sustained its wildlife remain absent.

The damage will unfold across different timescales. Some animals may return within days. Some habitats may need years. Severely damaged peat and ancient woodland features may take longer than a human lifetime.

There is also a loss that will be harder to see.

Conservation work carried out patiently over years can be undone by one severe fire. Habitat restoration, nest protection and efforts to rebuild rare populations depend on continuity. When the land burns, part of what is lost is the future that people had been trying to make possible.

A Landscape Defended By People Who Love It

The response to the fire has also shown how deeply this place is valued.

Firefighters have worked through smoke, heat, difficult terrain and changing winds. Conservation staff, estate workers, gamekeepers, landowners, volunteers and local businesses have helped protect homes, communities and habitat.

Their work has not been abstract.

Every firebreak cut, every water drop made and every hour spent holding the fire line has protected something living beyond it.

Residents have been able to return to Nethy Bridge after the immediate danger reduced. No human casualties have been reported, and there has been no confirmed public report of pets or livestock being killed.

That is welcome news.

It cannot yet tell us what happened to the wild animals across the burned ground.

When it becomes safe, conservation teams will begin the slower work of finding out. They will map how deeply different areas burned, examine surviving vegetation, search for nests and signs of injured or dead

wildlife, and watch which species return.

Their surveys will eventually provide numbers.

Numbers will be necessary, but they will never contain the whole loss.

They will not describe the parent bird returning to a place where its nest had been. They will not show the animal that escaped into unfamiliar woodland or the small creature whose absence changes what another species can eat next spring.

For now, what can be said is limited but clear.

Many healthy adult animals will have escaped. Some young, small and slow-moving animals could not. Nests have been destroyed, habitat has been damaged and the full cost remains hidden beneath smoke, ash and unsafe ground.

The animals that survived will now need food, shelter, quiet and time.

The kindest thing the public can do is stay away from closed areas, keep dogs out of the affected ground and allow firefighters and conservation workers to continue without interruption.

ENVIRONMENT | 27 July 2026

Kinghorn Faces Permanent Bathing Warning As Pollution Source Remains Unresolved

Read online: <https://modern.scot/kinghorn-faces-permanent-bathing-warning-as-pollution-source-remains-unresolved/>



Kinghorn Harbour Beach is carrying a fourth consecutive Poor classification, while bacterial pollution in the burn crossing the sand has prompted a warning expected to remain throughout the 2026 bathing season. Scottish Water told MSPs last year that it did not know when the underlying problem would be fixed.

Kinghorn Harbour Beach is one season away from permanent advice against bathing after years of

investigation, engineering work and repeated bacterial contamination failed to secure a lasting improvement in water quality.

The Fife beach is classified as Poor for the 2026 bathing season, following the same result in 2022, 2023 and 2024. If monitoring this summer produces another Poor annual classification, Kinghorn will have recorded five consecutive failures and permanent advice against bathing would have to be displayed from 2027.

A separate warning is already in place over pollution in Kinghorn Burn, which travels underground through the town before crossing the beach and entering the Firth of Forth.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Water have advised people and animals to avoid contact with the burn after testing found intermittently poor water quality that may present a risk to health. Temporary signs installed at the harbour and beach access points are likely to remain for the rest of the bathing season.

There is no general restriction on bathing or paddling in the designated harbour water. SEPA is monitoring the sea separately and says it will change its advice if problems are identified there.

The result is an unusual distinction for beach users: the sea remains available for bathing, but the polluted watercourse flowing across the sand should be avoided.

Pollution Levels Remain High In The Burn

SEPA tests bathing waters for *Escherichia coli* and intestinal enterococci, bacteria used as indicators of faecal contamination and potential health risks.

Their presence does not by itself prove that untreated sewage is responsible. Contamination may enter water through sewer overflows, incorrect drainage connections, surface-water systems, private infrastructure or other sources.

SEPA's published profile identifies sewer overflows and surface-water discharges among the risks affecting Kinghorn Harbour. It advises against bathing during heavy rain and for one or two days afterwards

because rainfall can increase pollution entering the water.

Several samples taken during the 2026 season exceeded the thresholds used to indicate low-quality coastal bathing water at the time of testing.

A sample collected on 18 May recorded 620 colony-forming units of *E. coli* and 500 units of intestinal enterococci per 100 millilitres. On 1 June, the figures rose to 4,000 and 1,100 respectively.

For coastal waters, SEPA describes individual results above 500 for *E. coli* or 200 for intestinal enterococci as indicative of low water quality when the sample was taken. Annual classifications are calculated separately using statistical analysis of four years of results, rather than any single reading.

Later samples showed lower bacterial levels, but separate testing of Kinghorn Burn continued to produce high results.

A SEPA spokesperson said the regulator had increased sampling frequency “in order to closely monitor bacterial levels in the watercourse and understand the full extent of the ongoing pollution pressure”.

The agency said precautionary advice was likely to remain in place throughout the bathing season.

Anyone who develops sickness, diarrhoea, stomach cramps or fever after contact with the burn has been advised to consult NHS Inform or call NHS 24 on 111.

Scottish Water Told MSPs It Did Not Know When The Problem Would Be Fixed

The uncertainty surrounding Kinghorn was acknowledged by Scottish Water during evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee in April 2025.

Professor Simon Parsons, the company’s director of environment, planning and assurance, said Scottish Water had worked with SEPA for years to understand the pollution affecting the harbour.

He said a former combined sewer overflow had been removed and that investigators believed pollutants might be entering through groundwater ingress into the sewerage system.

Asked directly by Green MSP Mark Ruskell when the problem would be fixed, Parsons replied:

■ “We are not sure at the moment.”

He said the source had not been fully established and that Scottish Water would provide a remedy if evidence showed its assets were responsible, or support action where the cause lay elsewhere.

Scottish Water’s latest public statement says investigations are continuing across both the local sewer network and the wider underground drainage system.

The company described the situation as “a uniquely complex issue” and said it recognised the concern caused by continued high sample results.

No published timetable states when the investigation will conclude, when further construction may begin or what action will follow if no single pollution source can be identified.

Enforcement Notice Was Successfully Appealed

Parsons also confirmed to MSPs that Scottish Water had successfully appealed an enforcement notice issued by SEPA.

He said the company had been unclear about what it was being required to do.

The appeal did not settle the source of the contamination or resolve the water-quality failure. It removed the original enforcement requirement after Scottish Water challenged the clarity of the notice.

The available official record does not explain whether SEPA subsequently considered a replacement notice, what alternative enforcement action followed or which organisation will be required to carry out remedial work if responsibility remains divided.

SEPA says improvement work continues with Scottish Water, local authorities and other partners. Its public information records investigations, removal of cross-connections, sewer repairs, further monitoring and updated modelling, but does not set out a final recovery programme.

£700,000 Work Brought Only Temporary Improvement

Kinghorn Harbour was also classified as Poor in 2017 and 2018.

Investigations identified the Bleaching Hill combined sewer overflow, which discharged into the Lady Burn, as a key source of pollution. The overflow was closed in September 2018, and Scottish Water spent approximately £700,000 on work intended to prevent further discharges.

The beach improved to Sufficient status in 2019 and again in 2021. No standard classification was calculated in 2020 because pandemic restrictions shortened the sampling season.

Poor status returned in 2022 and has remained since.

The improvement following the 2018 project indicates that removing the overflow had an effect. The later deterioration shows that it did not address every source of contamination affecting the burn and harbour.

Scottish Water has since removed incorrect connections and repaired defects identified in the sewer system. The company has not published the total cost of investigations and repairs carried out after the original £700,000 scheme.

The official profile describes a two-square-kilometre catchment containing Kinghorn Burn and Lady Burn, with urban drainage, underground watercourses, sewers and surface-water infrastructure meeting beneath the town. Agriculture is not identified as affecting the designated bathing water.

Warning Follows A Wider Incident In 2025

The current warning is not the first recent disruption at Kinghorn.

In July 2025, high microbiological readings at Kinghorn Harbour and Burntisland prompted temporary advice not to swim, paddle or play in the sea or in streams entering the beaches.

Visitors were told to keep pets away, wash their hands and footwear, avoid removing objects from the beach and not collect shellfish from the affected area.

The 2026 warning is narrower because it applies specifically to Kinghorn Burn rather than the entire designated bathing water.

For residents and visitors, however, the harbour has now faced repeated notices, four successive Poor classifications and continuing uncertainty over the source.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 25 July 2026

North Ayrshire Council Faces Transparency Questions Over £1.17m Data-Centre Deal

Read online: <https://modern.scot/north-ayrshire-council-faces-transparency-questions-over-1-17m-data-centre-deal/>



North Ayrshire Council has committed more than £1.17 million of public money to a six-year data-centre contract awarded directly to one supplier. DataVita operates its own Scottish facility but can also act as an intermediary for global cloud platforms under the national procurement framework. The published award does not identify the infrastructure involved, disclose whether third-party cloud services form part of the package or explain why the other approved suppliers were not invited to compete.

North Ayrshire Council has awarded a six-year contract worth £1,175,145.80, excluding VAT, for colocation services supporting council ICT infrastructure.

The agreement was concluded with DataVita on 10 June 2026, began on 22 June and is scheduled to continue until 21 June 2032. The award was published through Public Contracts Scotland on 7 July.

The notice describes the purchase as secure hosting within a Tier III-equivalent data-centre environment, together with connectivity and support. It does not identify the council systems, equipment or categories of information covered by the contract.

Colocation normally involves placing an organisation's servers, storage or network equipment inside a specialist commercial facility. The operator supplies the building, power, cooling, physical security and connectivity, while the customer may continue to own and control the equipment.

That differs from transferring a complete service or database to a public-cloud platform such as Microsoft Azure, Amazon Web Services or Google Cloud.

The available notice does not establish whether DataVita will have access to information held on North Ayrshire's equipment. It also does not say whether the contract consists entirely of physical colocation or includes cloud capacity and services ultimately supplied by other companies.

Data-Centre Operator And Cloud Intermediary

DataVita operates a physical data-centre business in Scotland. The North Ayrshire notice identifies the contractor as an SME based at York Road in Chapelhall, North Lanarkshire, and describes the purchase specifically as colocation for council ICT infrastructure.

On that evidence, this is principally a contract for DataVita's own hosting environment, connectivity and support rather than a straightforward resale of somebody else's cloud platform.

However, DataVita is also one of the suppliers approved under the Scottish Government's Cloud and Hosting

Services Framework. That framework covers public, private, hybrid and community cloud, colocation and cloud-transition services. Scottish Government cloud-procurement guidance says the framework can also be used to buy hyperscale services from AWS, Microsoft Azure and Google through reseller arrangements provided by framework suppliers.

DataVita can therefore occupy two positions in the public-sector supply chain. It may provide its own physical infrastructure while also acting as an intermediary through which a public body gains access to services operated by a global cloud company.

There is no evidence in North Ayrshire's published award that AWS, Azure, Google or another hyperscale platform is included in this particular £1.17 million contract.

There is equally no contractual breakdown in the public notice allowing residents to see whether every element is supplied directly by DataVita or whether any connectivity, cloud capacity, software or specialist support is ultimately provided by another company.

The issue is not that resale is necessarily improper. Resellers can simplify billing, support and procurement. The concern is that each additional supplier can create another contractual and technical dependency, while making responsibility for outages, security failures, data location and eventual migration harder for the public to follow.

No Mini-Competition For The Contract

North Ayrshire did not conduct a separate open tender or mini-competition for the six-year agreement.

Officials instead made a direct call-off from the Scottish Government framework, known as SP-22-023. The award notice records one tender and lists price as the award criterion. It states that the procurement complied with the framework agreement and applicable call-off procedures.

The framework contains five suppliers: Brightsolid, DataVita, iomart Hosting, Softcat and Storm ID. It began in November 2023 and remains available to Scottish public bodies until October 2027. The framework permits both direct awards and mini-competitions.

There is no documentary basis for describing North Ayrshire's procurement as unlawful or claiming that competitors were improperly excluded.

The narrower question is why the council selected the direct-award route rather than asking the other approved suppliers to compete for its particular requirement.

The published notice does not explain that decision.

Because no mini-competition was conducted, the public record contains no comparison showing what Brightsolid, iomart, Softcat or Storm ID might have charged. Nor does it identify whether another supplier could have offered different arrangements concerning data location, cloud reselling, energy consumption, technical support or the council's eventual exit from the contract.

The Scottish Government says the framework is intended to produce cash savings and value for money. That may be true across the framework as a whole. It does not provide a visible comparison demonstrating that DataVita offered the lowest price or strongest overall arrangement for this individual six-year award.

What Will Depend On The Contract?

North Ayrshire Council administers sensitive information across services including social work, child protection, education, housing, benefits and council tax.

The award notice does not say whether systems supporting any of those functions will be housed under the agreement.

It does not identify whether the contract covers primary operational servers, backup systems, disaster-recovery equipment, network infrastructure or a combination of those functions. The notice also contains no accompanying procurement or contractual documents.

The public record therefore does not disclose the agreed uptime, recovery times, backup arrangements, supplier access, subcontracting, service-failure penalties or process for removing council equipment when the agreement ends.

Those protections may be contained in documents that have not been published. Their absence from the award notice does not prove that the council or supplier has neglected security.

It prevents residents from assessing how much of the council's ability to operate will depend on the facility and which organisation would be responsible if a service involving several suppliers became unavailable.

The Scottish Government says all suppliers on the framework hold ISO 27001 certification and third-party cyber-security accreditation. It also says cloud services must be delivered within the European Economic Area and meet a power usage effectiveness standard below 1.6.

Those are useful baseline requirements. They do not disclose the precise safeguards, service locations or chains of responsibility included in North Ayrshire's individual contract.

The Cost To The Public

The agreement represents an average commitment of approximately £195,858 a year before VAT, although payments may not be distributed evenly across the six years.

A specialist data centre could save money if it allows North Ayrshire to close unsuitable server rooms, reduce energy and maintenance costs or avoid major upgrades to council buildings.

The award notice quantifies none of those potential savings.

It does not identify an existing facility that will close, a previous contract being replaced or any staffing, property, electricity or equipment costs expected to fall.

Without that baseline, residents cannot determine whether the contract will reduce North Ayrshire's total technology expenditure or add another recurring cost alongside cloud platforms, software subscriptions, network services and other digital contracts.

The absence is more consequential where the selected provider may supply both its own infrastructure and access to third-party cloud services. Without a published breakdown, it is difficult to establish which costs belong to the physical facility, which relate to connectivity and support, and whether North Ayrshire is paying for services passed through from another supplier.

Six Years Of Operational Dependence

Once servers and network equipment are installed, connected and incorporated into disaster-recovery

arrangements, moving them to another facility can require new connections, testing, physical transport and carefully controlled service migration.

Where third-party cloud services are also involved, departure may require changes to accounts, licences, applications, identity systems, stored data and commercial agreements.

None of this makes colocation or cloud reselling inherently undesirable. It makes a clear exit plan part of the value-for-money assessment.

North Ayrshire's notice does not reveal the council's arrangements for leaving the facility in 2032, the assistance DataVita would be required to provide, the ownership of installed connections or the costs of transferring services to a replacement operator.

A service can appear economical at the start and become expensive later if changing supplier requires extensive technical work or if the customer becomes dependent on the intermediary through which other services are purchased.

The public record does not contain enough information to assess that exposure.

Scottish-Controlled, But Part Of A Wider Supply Chain

Companies House identifies the legal business as HFD DataVita Limited, company number SC467509. It was incorporated in Scotland in January 2014, remains active and is registered as carrying out computer-facilities management activities.

HFD Technology Group Limited is its active person with significant control, holding at least 75 per cent of the shares and voting rights and possessing the right to appoint or remove directors.

The records therefore do not support a claim that North Ayrshire has transferred its infrastructure directly to a foreign technology conglomerate.

But Scottish ownership of the immediate contractor does not necessarily mean every service supplied through that contractor is Scottish-owned or operated. The national framework expressly allows suppliers to provide AWS, Azure and Google cloud through reseller arrangements.

That makes the identity of the prime contractor only one part of the question.

Residents also need to know whether subcontractors or hyperscale platforms sit behind the service, where each part of the infrastructure is located, which company has technical access and who carries responsibility when systems cross corporate boundaries.

Commercial Optimism Is Not Risk Planning

DataVita publicly presents the growth of AI and demand for high-performance computing as a long-term commercial opportunity.

In the company blog supplied to Modern Scot, it argued that reporting about AI failure had travelled faster than reality, described adverse coverage as sensational and said the principal barriers to successful adoption were human capability, management and culture.

A company building and selling AI-capable infrastructure has a legitimate interest in arguing that demand will persist. That commercial position does not establish that its data-centre services are insecure or that it

will fail to fulfil North Ayrshire's contract.

It does make the distinction between commercial confidence and operational preparation especially relevant.

Positive returns from AI do not remove the possibility of cyberattack, power failure, connectivity loss, equipment damage, cloud-provider disruption, inaccurate automated outputs, supplier failure or expensive dependence on an intermediary.

The correct measure of an infrastructure provider is not whether it expects the technology market to grow. It is whether it and its customers have planned for each layer of the service to fail.

North Ayrshire's published award does not provide that evidence. It does not identify the systems involved, any underlying cloud suppliers, the chain of operational responsibility or the exit arrangements applying in 2032.

The blog does not prove that DataVita takes risk lightly in its technical operations. It does reinforce the need for the council's contractual risk controls to be visible and independently assessable rather than inferred from the supplier's confidence in the market it serves.

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ENERGY | 25 July 2026

Ofgem Plans Tighter Controls On Dividends And Debt At Scotland's Energy Networks

Read online: <https://modern.scot/ofgem-plans-tighter-controls-on-dividends-and-debt-at-scotlands-energy-networks/>



Britain's energy regulator is consulting on stronger financial controls for the monopoly companies operating Scotland's electricity networks, including proposed restrictions on shareholder distributions, debt, changes to protected reserves and transfers of assets within corporate groups. Ofgem says the measures are intended to protect essential network businesses and consumers from emerging financial risks.

The companies operating Scotland's electricity

networks could face tighter controls over dividends, debt, protected reserves and transfers of assets under proposals intended to prevent financial problems elsewhere in their corporate groups from weakening essential infrastructure.

Ofgem published its policy conclusions on 1 July following a review of the financial ring fence surrounding Britain's regulated electricity and gas networks. It is now consulting on the detailed licence modifications needed to put those conclusions into effect.

The statutory consultation remains open until 12 August 2026. The rules have therefore not yet taken legal effect.

A financial ring fence is intended to separate a regulated network company from risks arising elsewhere within the wider business group that owns it. Ofgem says the system should protect networks from financial distress, strengthen their ability to continue providing essential services and limit the risk of excessive value being extracted from the licensed company.

The regulator previously warned that financial problems at a network business could lead to interrupted supplies, reduced maintenance, weaker customer service or higher bills and standing charges if consumers were required to support further investment.

In Scotland, the proposals are relevant to the companies controlling the transmission and distribution systems through which electricity reaches homes and businesses.

SSEN Transmission operates the high-voltage transmission network across the north of Scotland. Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks distributes electricity across the north of Scotland and the islands. SP Energy Networks, part of the ScottishPower group, is responsible for transmission and distribution across central and southern Scotland.

These companies operate regional monopolies. Householders and businesses cannot select a competing network operator in the way they can choose an energy supplier.

The costs allowed by Ofgem for maintaining, replacing and expanding the networks are ultimately recovered through regulated network charges incorporated into energy bills. Financial decisions inside the licensed companies can therefore affect investment, reliability and the costs carried by consumers.

Dividends Could Be Restricted When Debt Rises

One proposed change would introduce a distribution lock-up for electricity distribution companies when regulatory gearing reaches, or is forecast to reach, 75 per cent.

Regulatory gearing broadly compares a network company's net debt with the regulated value of its assets.

When the trigger applied, the licence would restrict shareholder distributions from the regulated company. A lock-up could also be imposed where its credit rating fell to BBB-minus with a negative outlook or watch.

Ofgem says retaining financial resources inside the licensed company during periods of elevated risk should help preserve its ability to invest, maintain services and withstand financial pressure.

The proposal does not prohibit ordinary dividends or challenge private ownership of the network companies. It establishes circumstances in which payments to shareholders would have to be restricted because the financial condition of the regulated business had deteriorated.

The 75 per cent gearing trigger is specifically associated with electricity distribution companies. The broader review also covers electricity transmission, gas transmission and gas distribution, but not every proposed condition is identical across all network sectors.

Approval Required Before Protected Reserves Support Dividends

Ofgem also proposes requiring regulatory approval before a network company changes protected capital or reserves in a way that could make them available for shareholder distributions.

Some categories of capital and reserves are not normally available to fund dividends. Under the proposed condition, a licensed company seeking to alter their status would have to explain the proposed change and obtain Ofgem's consent.

The regulator says this would protect capital held inside the ring fence and give it greater visibility when an accounting or corporate alteration could create distributable reserves that had not previously existed.

Industry respondents argued during the earlier consultation that boards and shareholders should retain responsibility for managing their companies' financial arrangements. Some maintained that existing requirements already prevented unaffordable dividends.

Ofgem concluded that an approval requirement was necessary to protect consumers against excessive distributions while continuing to permit stable returns funded from genuine earnings.

The distinction is relevant because the network companies require large amounts of private capital to finance infrastructure. Sustainable returns can support investment. Altering the status of protected reserves to create additional money for distribution raises a separate question about whether financial resources needed by an essential monopoly remain inside the licensed business.

Independent Directors Would Receive Greater Responsibility

The proposed licence changes would strengthen the involvement of sufficiently independent directors in

important financial decisions and regulatory submissions.

At least one independent director, together with another board member, would be required to sign documents covering the company's available resources, proposed distributions and wider financial resilience.

Independent directors would also have to participate in notifications concerning negative credit-rating action, withdrawal of a credit rating and certain transfers or disposals of assets between companies under the same corporate ownership.

A majority of network respondents opposed requiring an independent director's signature. They argued that board approval should be sufficient and that the change would add procedural formality without necessarily improving decisions.

Ofgem said the existing arrangements could allow important notifications to be submitted without an independent director being properly involved or aware of the underlying issue.

Independent representation would also be required at remuneration committee meetings considering executive pay. Ofgem says remuneration should reflect the performance and financial condition of the licensed network company rather than only the priorities of its wider corporate group.

The proposals do not give independent directors control over the business. They are intended to ensure that warnings, asset transfers and decisions affecting the financial resilience of the regulated company receive scrutiny beyond executive management and representatives of the parent owner.

Companies Would Have To Demonstrate Financial Capacity

Electricity distribution companies would be required to maintain more than one investment-grade credit rating.

The current obligation to use "reasonable endeavours" to maintain additional ratings would be replaced with a direct licence requirement.

Network companies would also have to certify that they had sufficient financial resources and facilities to cover the relevant price-control period or at least the following three years. Their assessment would need to refer to financial stress testing carried out before the certificate was signed.

Where a negative credit-rating event occurred, an electricity distribution company could be required to provide Ofgem with a financial-resilience report and updated projections within 60 days.

The regulator says earlier and more detailed information would allow it to identify deterioration and intervene before a network company reached serious financial distress.

Ofgem's review was informed partly by lessons from the retail energy crisis, although network companies operate under a different commercial and regulatory model from energy suppliers.

Numerous suppliers failed after wholesale energy prices rose, transferring substantial costs into the wider energy system. Ofgem says network businesses remained largely resilient during that period, but the supplier crisis, increasingly complex corporate structures and the scale of future infrastructure investment demonstrated the need for stronger protections before similar weaknesses emerged elsewhere.

Transfers Of Network Assets Would Face Greater Scrutiny

The proposals would also increase oversight when assets are sold or transferred between companies under the same parent ownership.

An independent director and another board member would have to sign relevant notifications concerning internal disposals and transfers.

Ofgem considered wider intervention but narrowed the proposed requirement to transactions taking place within the same corporate group.

Industry respondents argued that accounting obligations and commercial incentives already encouraged assets to be transferred at an appropriate value. Some said further requirements could delay projects or make legitimate transactions less efficient.

Ofgem maintained that related-company transactions could expose a licensed network to the financial interests or difficulties of another part of the group and therefore required independent awareness and formal accountability.

Scotland's electricity networks include land, substations, overhead lines, cables, buildings, development rights and other infrastructure. Their permitted costs and investor returns are ultimately recovered through the regulated charging system.

Transfers inside a corporate group may be legitimate and operationally useful. The public nevertheless has an interest in ensuring that essential assets are not moved in a way that weakens the licensed business, reduces its financial resilience or transfers value elsewhere without adequate scrutiny.

Scotland's Network Expansion Raises The Stakes

The review comes as Scotland prepares for a substantial expansion of electricity infrastructure.

New overhead lines, substations, subsea connections and reinforcements are being developed to connect renewable generation and carry more electricity across Britain. The north of Scotland is expected to host a particularly large share of that construction.

Network owners argue that they must remain attractive to investors because the transition requires unprecedented capital expenditure. Restrictions that make financing more difficult or expensive could delay projects and increase the costs recovered from consumers.

Weak financial regulation carries an opposing risk.

A highly leveraged network company may have less ability to absorb unexpected costs, refinance debt or continue investment during financial stress. Excessive distributions or poorly controlled transfers could move resources out of the regulated company while customers remain dependent on the infrastructure it operates.

Unlike an ordinary commercial company, an electricity network cannot simply cease trading without consequences for households, businesses and public services. Consumers could eventually carry the cost of stabilising or replacing a financially weakened operator.

Ofgem is therefore attempting to preserve two objectives: keeping regulated networks capable of attracting investment while preventing their financial strength from being reduced for the benefit of shareholders or other businesses in the corporate group.

Protection Will Depend On Transparency And Enforcement

The proposed controls are stronger than the existing framework, but their effectiveness will depend on how quickly Ofgem identifies risk and how firmly it acts.

The regulator would receive additional certificates, credit reports, financial forecasts and notifications. Much of the decisive evidence may remain inside confidential regulatory submissions rather than being published in a form that ordinary consumers or affected communities can examine.

That creates a continuing transparency problem.

Communities across Scotland are being asked to accommodate major new electricity infrastructure. Consumers will help fund the permitted costs of those networks over many years. They should be able to understand the financial condition of the licensed companies, the debt they carry, the amounts distributed to owners and the resources retained for maintenance and investment.

A ring fence provides protection only when the regulator can detect weakening financial conditions before they become a crisis.

Ofgem's statutory consultation closes on 12 August. Energy networks and other interested parties can submit responses before the regulator decides whether to introduce the proposed licence modifications.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 25 July 2026

Scottish Local Government External Debt Budgeted To Rise By £3.2 Billion

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scottish-local-government-external-debt-budgeted-to-rise-by-3-2-billion/>



Scotland's councils and other local-authority bodies have budgeted for combined external debt to reach almost £28.8 billion during 2026–27, as borrowing remains the principal source of capital finance for schools, housing, roads and other public infrastructure. The figure is a budget estimate rather than money already borrowed, but it represents a growing claim on future local budgets.

External debt across Scotland's local-government system is budgeted to rise from a provisional £25.617

billion in 2025–26 to £28.793 billion in 2026–27.

The planned increase is £3.176 billion in one financial year, equivalent to approximately 12.4 per cent.

The figures come from the Scottish Government's annual Provisional Outturn and Budget Estimates return, which compares provisional financial results for 2025–26 with the budgets approved or planned for 2026–27. The publication covers 50 local-authority bodies, including Scotland's 32 councils, valuation joint boards, regional transport partnerships and the Tay Road Bridge authority.

External debt includes gross external borrowing, finance leases and other long-term liabilities. It does not mean councils have borrowed £28.8 billion to pay ordinary running costs.

Local authorities generally borrow to finance assets expected to remain useful for many years, including schools, care homes, council housing, roads, flood defences, vehicles, machinery and other public infrastructure.

Borrowing can allow the cost of a school, housing development or major road project to be spread across the generations expected to use it. It also commits future council budgets to interest and repayment costs, reducing the money available for services years after the original spending decision was made.

The £28.793 billion figure is a budget estimate rather than a final result. Councils may borrow less than planned, postpone projects or alter how investment is financed. It nevertheless shows the financial direction local authorities are preparing for during the current year.

Borrowing Remains The Main Source Of Capital Finance

Capital expenditure across Scottish local government was provisionally reported at £4.461 billion for 2025–26 and is budgeted to rise to £5.318 billion during 2026–27.

That represents an increase of £857 million, or approximately 19.2 per cent.

The amount of capital investment expected to be financed through in-year borrowing is rising more sharply. It is budgeted to increase from £2.228 billion in 2025–26 to £3.349 billion in 2026–27, a rise of £1.121 billion, or just over 50 per cent.

Borrowing was the primary source of capital finance in 2025–26 and is expected to remain so in 2026–27. Grants and other contributions provide another substantial part of the funding required.

Education is one source of increased capital spending. The Scottish Government says annual education investment during the five years from 2024–25 to 2028–29 is expected to average around £300 million more than during the preceding five-year period, partly reflecting the rollout of the Learning Estate Investment Programme.

Other borrowing may support housing, transport, social-care facilities, environmental projects and the replacement or repair of ageing council assets.

The national totals do not establish whether each investment is affordable or represents good value. Those questions can only be answered by examining individual councils' capital programmes, treasury-management strategies, project costs and audited accounts.

External Debt Does Not Show The Full Underlying Borrowing Requirement

The figures also record a Capital Financing Requirement of £28.468 billion for 2025–26, rising to a budget estimate of £31.222 billion in 2026–27.

The Capital Financing Requirement measures the amount of capital expenditure an authority has decided should ultimately be supported by borrowing or another credit arrangement. Repayment must be met from future budgets.

It is therefore an indication of local government's underlying need to borrow, rather than a record of external loans already taken out.

The requirement is higher than external debt because councils can temporarily use existing cash balances instead of borrowing the full amount from outside lenders. The Scottish Government describes local authorities collectively as “under-borrowed” because external debt remains below the underlying financing requirement.

That does not mean the borrowing requirement has disappeared. It means part of it is currently being financed internally.

Should councils later need those cash balances for other purposes, they may borrow externally to replace them. The £31.222 billion Capital Financing Requirement therefore provides a broader indication of capital spending that must ultimately be supported through future council finances.

Reserves Are Expected To Fall

The capital plans sit alongside continuing pressure on councils' day-to-day finances.

General Fund and harbour reserves were provisionally reported at £2.775 billion at the end of March 2026 and are budgeted to fall to £2.617 billion by March 2027.

Councils collectively expect to use £274 million of reserves to support their 2026–27 revenue budgets.

Net revenue expenditure is budgeted at £17.254 billion, with education accounting for around half of General Fund service spending and social work accounting for approximately 31 per cent. Together, those services represent about 81 per cent of the total.

Revenue expenditure and capital borrowing serve different purposes. Councils cannot ordinarily borrow simply to fill gaps in the annual cost of services.

The figures nevertheless show financial pressure on both sides of local-government finances. Councils are drawing down reserves to support current services while planning greater borrowing to finance long-term assets.

The Accounts Commission reported in June that Scotland's 32 councils faced a combined revenue budget gap of approximately £529 million in 2026–27, despite a small real-terms increase in Scottish Government funding.

It also found that capital funding had fallen by 15 per cent, requiring councils to borrow more for housing and other infrastructure and increasing their exposure to longer-term financial risk.

COSLA, which represents Scotland's councils, said the local-government capital allocation in the Scottish Budget was £681.4 million, compared with the £844 million it had requested.

COSLA is an interested representative body rather than an independent auditor, but its figures help explain why councils may be relying more heavily on debt. Buildings, roads and other assets continue to require investment when direct capital funding fails to cover planned expenditure.

Debt Is Neither Automatically Wasteful Nor Automatically Safe

A rising debt total is not evidence by itself of financial mismanagement.

Failing to invest can create its own costs. Schools, roads, bridges, housing and care facilities can become more expensive to repair when essential work is postponed. Poor buildings may also increase energy bills, disruption and the need for temporary accommodation.

The relevant questions concern what has been built or purchased, how long it is expected to last, what the full financing cost will be and whether the public retains an asset worth the total amount paid.

The national figures do not show how the £28.793 billion is distributed among individual authorities, which councils are planning the steepest increases or how much of their future income will be committed to financing costs.

Nor do they establish whether major projects have stayed within their original budgets.

The Scottish Government has published the council-level source data in supporting capital and revenue workbooks. Any comparison between councils must account for population, asset ownership, council-housing responsibilities, service demands and the scale of local infrastructure. A major city will normally hold more debt than a small rural or island authority, without that difference alone demonstrating greater financial risk.

Every council publishes a capital programme and treasury-management strategy. Those documents should identify the projects being financed, expected borrowing, debt maturity, interest-rate exposure and the proportion of annual income committed to financing costs.

That committed share is often more revealing than the total debt figure. As interest, repayments and long-term contractual obligations take a larger portion of council income, elected members have less room to respond to new pressures without increasing charges, using reserves, postponing maintenance or reducing services.

Scotland's rising local-government debt is therefore a transfer of costs across time. It may finance schools, homes and infrastructure that communities genuinely need. It also places a greater obligation on future residents and future councils.

Before further borrowing is approved, councillors should be able to explain what the public will own, how long it should remain useful, what the full expected financing cost will be and which services would carry the consequences if those assumptions prove wrong.

The statistics were first published on 30 June 2026. The Scottish Government updated the publication on 24 July after Stirling Council supplied previously missing Council Tax Reduction revenue data. The government said that revision affected the revenue workbook only and did not alter the reported national capital or external-debt totals.

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ENVIRONMENT | 25 July 2026

Cairngorms Wildfire Declared Major Incident As Nethy Bridge Is Evacuated

Read online: <https://modern.scot/cairngorms-wildfire-declared-major-incident-as-nethy-bridge-is-evacuated/>



An entire Highland village has been evacuated after strengthening winds drove a long-running wildfire towards Nethy Bridge, turning an operation that had appeared to be making progress into a major incident. Smoke has travelled across the north-east as far as Aberdeen, while large parts of the Cairngorms National Park remain closed.

Police Scotland declared a major incident on Friday evening after worsening wind conditions changed the

behaviour of the Cairngorms wildfire and pushed it towards Nethy Bridge.

All residents of the village were told to leave as a precaution. Access roads were closed and people were directed to a respite centre at the Macdonald Aviemore Hotel, where Highland Council established support arrangements. Police said additional officers were being deployed to contact residents, identify vulnerable people and maintain cordons around the affected area.

The decision marked a serious escalation in a fire that began near Ryvoan Bothy and Glenmore shortly before noon on Wednesday 15 July.

More than 500 firefighters have been mobilised during the response, although that figure represents personnel deployed over the course of the incident rather than the number working at one time. Specialist wildfire appliances, all-terrain vehicles, helicopters and ground crews have been used across difficult moorland, woodland and mountainous terrain.

The Scottish Government's Resilience Room met on Friday night under First Minister John Swinney. The meeting included Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, ministers and other agencies involved in the response.

Mr Swinney said changes in wind conditions had increased the speed at which the fire was spreading. Firefighters were concentrating on creating a firebreak while police supported the evacuation.

Nine Days Of Fire

The incident was first reported at about 11.50am on 15 July. The fire initially spread across heathland near Ryvoan Bothy, between the Glenmore and Abernethy areas of the national park.

Properties and businesses around Glenmore were evacuated during the early stages, the Cairngorm Ski Road was closed at Coylumbridge and walkers were assisted from the hills. The fire was estimated to be affecting about six square kilometres by the following day.

Crews used a high-volume pump to draw water from Loch Morlich, while helicopters carried out repeated water-bombing operations. Firefighters and land managers also worked to create firebreaks intended to stop

flames spreading through heather, woodland and other dry vegetation.

By 21 July, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service said approximately ten square kilometres of land had been affected across Glenmore and Abernethy. More than 100 firefighters had taken part by that stage, with substantial hotspots remaining across a large and complex area.

Reports earlier in the week had described visible improvement and progress on both sides of the fire. Firefighters nevertheless continued to warn that wildfires can change rapidly when temperature, wind direction or wind strength alters.

That warning became reality on Friday.

Strengthening winds increased the rate and unpredictability of the fire's movement, causing it to spread towards Nethy Bridge. An operation that had been expected to continue through the weekend dealing with hotspots and possible reignition became an evacuation and village-protection operation.

Smoke Reaches Aberdeen

Smoke from the wildfire has travelled far beyond the immediate fireground.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service said people in eastern Aviemore, Inverurie, Banchory, Kintore, surrounding parts of Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen could see or smell smoke through the weekend.

Residents affected by smoke have been advised to keep windows and doors closed as a precaution. Anyone experiencing concerning symptoms should seek advice from NHS 24.

Smoke direction can change quickly with the wind. Its presence many miles from the fire does not necessarily mean flames are approaching those areas, but it shows the geographical reach of the incident and the volume of vegetation still burning or smouldering.

The fire service has described conditions as dynamic and unpredictable, with the possibility of flare-ups, reignition and changes in the direction of smoke.

Large Area Remains Closed

Members of the public have repeatedly been told not to enter restricted parts of the national park or attempt to pass cordons.

Closed or restricted areas include paths around Glenmore, Loch Morlich and Badaguish. Restrictions also affect the Old Logging Way and routes towards Cairngorm Mountain, the Northern Corries, Meall a' Bhuachaille, the Green Loch, Strath Nethy and Bynack More.

Paths through Abernethy Forest south of Forest Lodge towards Ryvoan Bothy are also affected.

These restrictions are not confined to the visible fire line. Helicopters are operating at low altitude, firefighting vehicles require access and apparently extinguished ground can continue burning below the surface.

Police have also warned drone operators not to fly near the emergency response. Unauthorised aircraft can interfere with helicopter operations and place crews at risk.

Arthur's Seat Fire Extinguished

The Cairngorms incident is the only current Scottish wildfire confirmed publicly as a major incident.

A separate grass fire broke out on Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh on the evening of Sunday 19 July. Six fire appliances and specialist resources were sent to the scene.

Firefighters remained until Tuesday 21 July, extinguishing hotspots and damping down the affected area. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service subsequently confirmed that crews had left the scene.

Its timing, during the same prolonged period of dry and warm weather, placed further strain on the fire service while substantial resources were already committed in the Highlands.

The very-high wildfire warning covering the Central Highlands and parts of southern and eastern Scotland was scheduled to remain in effect until Friday 24 July. The warning period has now ended, but the Cairngorms fire remains active and weather-driven conditions continue to govern its behaviour.

What Remains Unknown

No official cause of the Cairngorms fire has been announced.

There has also been no final assessment of ecological damage, losses to forestry or moorland, harm to wildlife, damage to buildings or the total financial cost of the response.

The ten-square-kilometre figure was issued before Friday's renewed spread. It should therefore not be treated as a final measurement of the affected area.

The number of people evacuated from Nethy Bridge has not yet been formally published, nor has a timetable been given for residents to return.

The immediate priority remains protecting life and preventing the fire from reaching homes. A full environmental and operational assessment will follow only after the incident has been brought under control.

Residents should follow Police Scotland, Highland Council and Scottish Fire and Rescue Service updates rather than relying on unofficial reports or images circulating online.

Anyone who sees a wildfire should move to a safe place, call 999 and provide the location, nearest access point, direction of spread and any visible danger to people or property. People should not attempt to fight a large outdoor fire themselves.

Information in this report was checked against official updates available at approximately 3am on Saturday 25 July 2026. The situation remains fast-moving and may change after publication.

ENVIRONMENT | 24 July 2026

Livingston Recycling Firm Secures £3.5 Million Public Grant For Plastics Technology

Read online: <https://modern.scot/livingston-recycling-firm-secures-3-5-million-public-grant-for-plastics-technology/>



ReVentas will expand its Livingston pilot plant as it works towards commercial deployment of a solvent-based process for difficult plastic waste, although the location of future plants and the number of Scottish jobs have not been disclosed.

A Livingston recycling technology company has received a £3.5 million Scottish Enterprise grant to develop a process intended to recover reusable plastic from food packaging and other waste that conventional recycling systems struggle to handle.

ReVentas Limited will use the research and

development funding over the next three years to expand its pilot plant at the Impact Technology Centre on Kirkton Campus.

The grant forms part of a £9 million development project focused on plastic films contaminated with inks, colours, odours, additives and food residues. These materials include bags, wrappers, pouches and other flexible packaging that is frequently burned, exported or rejected from existing recycling systems.

ReVentas says its technology can separate contaminants from polyethylene and polypropylene while preserving the polymers themselves. The recovered material can then be converted into pellets intended for use in new packaging, automotive components and other manufactured products.

The company was incorporated in 2020 and has operated from Livingston since 2021. Its technology developed from earlier work carried out by Impact Solutions, an independent testing and innovation laboratory based at the same site.

Scottish Enterprise said the project could help address one of the most difficult parts of the plastic waste stream while supporting the development of a circular economy in Scotland.

The award comes ahead of changes requiring plastic film and flexible packaging to be collected separately from homes and businesses across the UK by 31 March 2027.

Separate collection is expected to increase the amount of plastic film entering the waste system, but collection alone will not make the material recyclable. Facilities will still be required to sort, clean and process it into material that manufacturers are prepared to use.

Conventional mechanical recycling normally involves washing, shredding and remelting plastic. Contamination and repeated heating can reduce the quality of the recycled polymer, limiting the products that can be made from it.

ReVentas instead uses a solvent-based dissolution process. Prepared plastic is placed inside processing equipment where the target polymer is dissolved. Filters remove solid particles and other contaminants before the polymer is separated, dried and formed into pellets.

The solvent is intended to be recovered and returned to the process rather than consumed during each production cycle.

Unlike some forms of chemical recycling, the ReVentas method does not aim to break plastic down into oil, gas or its original molecular building blocks. The company says preserving the polymer allows it to produce recycled material with qualities comparable to newly manufactured plastic.

ReVentas has previously claimed that its technology could reduce carbon emissions by as much as 80 per cent compared with producing virgin plastic. The company has not published the full life-cycle assessment or detailed assumptions supporting that figure.

Independent research has found that dissolution technologies may provide environmental advantages where they replace incineration or the manufacture of new polymer. The eventual benefit depends upon the energy used by the plant, the source and recovery rate of the solvent, transport distances, the quality of the incoming waste and the amount of unusable residue produced.

The solvent formulation used by ReVentas at Livingston has not been publicly identified. While its composition may be commercially sensitive, further information would be required to assess toxicity, emissions, fire risk, losses during operation and the treatment of contaminated residues.

The company's patent documents describe systems for recovering and recirculating solvent, including removing residual solvent from the recycled plastic during extrusion and returning it to the process following distillation.

The £3.5 million grant will meet part of the cost of a project valued at £9 million. Scottish Enterprise has not disclosed how the remaining £5.5 million will be financed.

The economic development agency has also referred to a separate £2 million investment in ReVentas and assistance provided to secure international finance. It has not stated whether the £2 million investment is included within the £9 million project or sits outside it.

ReVentas completed a Series A investment round in 2025 involving Scottish Enterprise, Poland's Orlen VC and Beiersdorf Venture Capital, which is associated with the German consumer-products company. The value of that funding round was not disclosed.

Combining public grants, government-backed investment and private finance is common during the development of industrial technology. The absence of a complete funding breakdown nevertheless makes it difficult to establish how much of the present project is being financed by public bodies and how much is being provided by private investors.

Scottish Enterprise said the company was creating highly skilled green employment, but neither the agency nor ReVentas has stated how many jobs will result from the new project.

No figures have been provided for the number of permanent posts, the proportion based in Livingston or the temporary construction and engineering work associated with expanding the pilot plant.

ReVentas is also preparing to move beyond pilot-scale development through an engineering and licensing agreement with KBR, a multinational company headquartered in the United States.

The alliance is intended to support the design, licensing and international deployment of commercial plants using the Livingston-developed technology.

ReVentas says engineering work is under way for a demonstration plant capable of producing 10,000 tonnes of recycled high-density polyethylene each year. The company expects the facility to be commissioned during the final quarter of 2028.

Its longer-term objective is to support more than 750,000 tonnes of annual processing capacity by 2036.

The location of the first commercial demonstration plant has not been announced. ReVentas and Scottish Enterprise have also made no public commitment that future commercial plants will be constructed in Livingston or elsewhere in Scotland.

An earlier ReVentas announcement suggested that its first 10,000-tonne plant could begin operating in 2027, followed by 140,000 tonnes of additional capacity by 2031. The current timetable moves commissioning into late 2028 while setting a considerably larger target for the following decade.

Moving a process from laboratory and pilot operation into continuous industrial production can involve substantial engineering, regulatory and financial difficulties. The revised timetable means the Scottish Enterprise award remains investment in technology development rather than confirmation that commercial operation has been achieved.

The arrangement with KBR could allow ReVentas to earn revenue by licensing its process to plants around the world without financing or operating every facility itself.

That model could generate intellectual-property income and engineering work in Scotland. It could equally result in the main industrial plants, employment and physical recycling capacity being established elsewhere.

Patent records show that different parts of the technology are held by different companies.

An earlier patent family covering pigment removal and solvent recycling lists Impact Laboratories Limited, trading as Impact Solutions, as the owner. Named inventors include ReVentas founders Thomas Rose and Steven Burns.

A later patent family covering solvent-based separation and grading of reclaimed polymers lists ReVentas Limited as the owner.

Scottish Enterprise said it had helped the company develop an intellectual-property strategy. The conditions attached to the £3.5 million grant have not been made public, including whether patents developed using the funding must remain under Scottish ownership or whether the public agency will receive any return from future licensing.

There is also no published explanation of what protections would apply if ReVentas or its intellectual property were acquired by another company.

The project addresses a genuine weakness in Scotland's recycling system. Flexible plastic packaging is produced in large quantities but remains difficult to process into material of sufficient quality for new products.

A commercially successful method could reduce incineration, limit the use of newly manufactured polymers and help Scotland handle the additional plastic film that will enter separate collections from 2027.

The return on the £3.5 million grant will depend upon more than the performance of the Livingston pilot plant.

The number of Scottish jobs, the independently verified environmental savings, continued ownership of the intellectual property and the location of future commercial facilities will determine how much of the resulting industry remains in Scotland.

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ENVIRONMENT | 24 July 2026

Balloch Castle Ash Shortlisted For UK Tree Of The Year After Surviving Storms, Disease And Crowds

Read online: <https://modern.scot/balloch-castle-ash-shortlisted-for-uk-tree-of-the-year-after-surviving-storms-disease-and-crowds/>



The veteran ash on the southern shore of Loch Lomond has endured hurricane-force winds, a suspected lightning strike, ash dieback and generations of visitors. Its nomination also draws attention to the uncertain future facing Scotland's remaining mature ash trees.

A veteran ash tree standing on the lawn before Balloch Castle has been shortlisted for the Woodland Trust's UK Tree of the Year 2026 competition, placing one of West Dunbartonshire's most familiar natural

landmarks among ten trees selected for their ability to survive extraordinary conditions.

The Balloch Castle Ash has a girth of 4.3 metres and occupies an exposed position overlooking the southern end of Loch Lomond. West Dunbartonshire Council describes it as approximately 200 years old, while the Woodland Trust's more cautious competition record lists its age as more than 150 years. No definitive planting record has been identified, but either estimate places the tree within the period in which the former Balloch estate was being developed into the designed landscape visible today.

The tree was selected from public nominations as one of two wildcard entries in the competition. It is joined on the shortlist by the Earlstoun Lightning Oak near Dalry in Dumfries and Galloway, giving Scotland two of this year's ten finalists. The theme for 2026 is "Against All Odds", with shortlisted trees having endured disease, extreme weather, development, wartime damage and, in one case, life on top of a church tower.

In Balloch, the evidence of endurance is visible in the ash's broad, heavily buttressed base, damaged trunk and irregular form. The Woodland Trust says it is believed to have been struck by lightning and has remained standing through repeated storms, including the destructive weather that crossed central Scotland in January 1968.

That event is commonly remembered as the 1968 hurricane, although it was not a tropical hurricane. Contemporary records described hurricane-force winds of exceptional strength across central and southern Scotland. Forest Research recorded a severe westerly gale on 15 January that caused extensive windthrow in Scottish forests, while reports from the Vale of Leven described mature trees being brought down around Balloch and Drymen Road.

The ash later acquired an accidental place in Scottish music history. It stood facing the stage when Oasis played Balloch Castle Country Park in August 1996, part of a period in which the park became a major outdoor concert venue. Runrig and REM have also performed there, and the ash has remained in the middle of the park's public life as the crowds and stages have come and gone.

Its surroundings are themselves nationally recognised. Balloch Castle Country Park contains roughly 200 acres

of ornamental woodland, open parkland, gardens, meadow and shoreline. The present Gothic-style castle was built in 1808 for the Glasgow merchant and banker John Buchanan of Ardoch, who began laying out the estate and planting unusual trees and shrubs. The work was continued after Gibson Stott bought the property in 1830.

Glasgow Corporation bought the estate during the early 20th century to improve public access and encourage travel to Balloch. It later became a country park and now forms the only country park within Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park. Historic Environment Scotland's inventory describes the designed landscape as having outstanding scenic, architectural and nature-conservation value, with its historic collection of trees and shrubs receiving a high assessment for horticultural interest.

The nomination is especially pertinent because the Balloch tree is living with ash dieback rather than having defeated it conclusively. The fungal disease, caused by *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus*, produces progressive leaf loss and damages the tree's ability to transport water. Younger ash trees frequently die, while older specimens may decline more slowly or remain alive for years, sometimes with the disease compounded by root infections and other stresses.

Forestry and Land Scotland estimates that between 50 and 75 per cent of Scotland's approximately 11 million mature ash trees could die over the next two decades. Diseased trees can become brittle and require careful assessment where they stand beside paths, roads or buildings. However, forestry guidance also cautions against removing every affected tree prematurely: some continue to survive, and disease-tolerant trees are needed to produce the next generation of naturally resistant ash.

Older ash trees also carry ecological value that cannot quickly be replaced by planting saplings. Their comparatively alkaline bark supports mosses and lichens, while damaged limbs, hollows, crevices and decaying wood provide habitat for fungi, insects, birds and other wildlife. NatureScot identifies old ash as particularly valuable for important lichen communities, including species associated with Scotland's western woodlands.

The Balloch tree must also contend with its popularity. The Woodland Trust estimates that more than one million people visit the park each year and lists heavy footfall among the pressures it has survived. Visitors regularly sit beneath the canopy, picnic beside the trunk and stand on the exposed roots for photographs. The attention demonstrates the tree's place in the community, but continued survival will depend upon inspection and careful management as disease, weather and public use place competing demands on an ageing living structure.

Councillor David McBride, West Dunbartonshire Council's convener of infrastructure, regeneration and economic development, said the tree had been enjoyed by generations of residents and visitors and had become part of the character of Balloch Park. Vice-convener Councillor Lawrence O'Neill said the nomination offered an opportunity to celebrate the area's natural environment and encouraged the public to support it.

The competition itself should not be confused with a new statutory protection. Balloch Castle's wider designed landscape is included in Scotland's national inventory, but inclusion does not place a duty upon an owner to maintain or improve a site. Individual trees may receive separate protection through planning controls, including Tree Preservation Orders, but a Tree of the Year nomination is principally intended to raise public awareness.

Scottish trees have won the past two UK competitions. The remote Skipinnish Oak was victorious in 2024, followed by Glasgow's Argyle Street Ash in 2025. Both entered as public wildcards, the same route by which the Balloch Castle Ash reached this year's final shortlist.

Voting remains open until 5pm on 29 September, with the winner due to be announced in early October.

Whatever the result, the nomination records the Balloch ash as more than attractive scenery. It is a surviving part of an early 19th-century landscape, a witness to one of Scotland's most destructive storms, an accidental concertgoer and one of the mature native trees now carrying the consequences of a disease reshaping the Scottish countryside.

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COMMUNITY | 24 July 2026

Tributes Paid After Councillor Paul Henke Dies Aged 76

Read online: <https://modern.scot/tributes-paid-after-councillor-paul-henke-dies-aged-76/>



The Forth and Endrick councillor, former Royal Navy bomb-disposal officer and author had served the Balfon community for years before his election to Stirling Council in 2022.

Tributes have been paid to Stirling councillor Paul Henke, who has died aged 76 after a life spanning military service, business, writing and local public office.

Stirling Council announced his death on Wednesday, 22 July, saying its thoughts were with his wife, Dorothy, and the wider Henke family. The Courier reported that he died following a short illness. No further details have been released.

Councillor Henke represented the Forth and Endrick ward as a Scottish Conservative and Unionist member. He was elected in May 2022 and served alongside Labour councillor Gerry McGarvey and SNP councillor Rosemary Fraser in the three-member rural ward.

Stirling Council chief executive Brian Roberts said Councillor Henke had been respected both in the communities he represented and among elected members at the council.

“Councillor Henke was hugely respected in his local community and across the Council Chamber,” he said.

“He served his local community with dedication for many years and ensured their voices were heard, first as a community councillor and then on Stirling Council. Our deepest condolences to Paul’s family and friends at this sad time.”

His election to the council followed years of involvement in Balfon. He had served for five years as chairman of Balfon Community Council and spent six years as president of the local parent-teacher association. He once described standing for election as the natural consequence of his belief in civic responsibility: people could complain about their surroundings, he said, or decide to become involved and attempt to change them.

During his time as a councillor, he raised concerns about rural housing, road conditions and the ability of younger residents to remain in the communities where they had grown up.

In a 2024 interview with Holyrood magazine, Councillor Henke said the shortage of social housing in west Stirlingshire was forcing locally born residents to leave the area. He also identified the condition of the A811 and A81 as a persistent concern for constituents, arguing that roads had become particularly important to rural commerce after the loss of railway connections.

He spoke warmly of Balfon and the services that sustained village life, including its doctors’ surgery, library, ambulance provision, shops, schools and public transport. He and Dorothy had moved there from Kincardine Bridge approximately 25 years earlier, initially because of Balfon High School’s reputation.

His local political career was only the latest chapter in an unusually varied life.



Paul-Henke.

Paul Henke

Born and raised in the mining valleys of South Wales, he was the son of a Polish immigrant who had come to Britain during the Second World War and later worked as a coal miner. After attending Pontypridd Boys' Grammar School, Paul Henke trained as a Royal Navy officer at Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth.

He qualified as a bomb and mine-disposal specialist, working with explosives and underwater-diving teams before commanding minesweeping and minehunting vessels. His service in the Royal Navy and Naval Reserve lasted approximately 25 years, and he left with the rank of lieutenant commander.

His own account of that career included destroying Second World War mines found off the British coast and surviving a machine-gun

attack by IRA gun runners in Ireland in 1976. He also worked with the then Prince Charles during part of his naval service.

After leaving the Navy, he spent time in Nigeria overseeing a saturation-diving system and later lived in the American Midwest. He subsequently established a financial-services business before turning his attention increasingly to writing.

Councillor Henke became the author of 20 books, drawing upon history, international travel and elements of his military experience.

His work covered several distinct forms of popular fiction. The Tears books followed the Griffiths family through periods of historical upheaval. His action novels included the Nick Hunter series and stories involving the fictional International Force Against Terrorism, while the Gumshoe novellas centred upon a private investigator working in New York during the 1940s and 1950s.

In September 2025, he appeared at the inaugural Balfon Book Festival to discuss his naval career and his work as an author. The event brought together two parts of his life that might otherwise have appeared quite separate: the dangerous and highly technical work of naval mine disposal, and the solitary business of turning experience and imagination into books.

He continued serving as a councillor while writing, attending community council meetings and local surgeries across Forth and Endrick. His scheduled engagements covered communities including Balfon, Killearn, Fintry, Arnprior and Drymen, reflecting the dispersed character of the ward and the considerable travel involved in representing it.

Behind the naval career, published novels and political affiliation was a long record of participation in the ordinary institutions of community life: the school association, the community council, village meetings and, eventually, the council chamber.

He is survived by his wife, Dorothy, and their family.

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COMMUNITY | 24 July 2026

£27.8 Million Larkhall Leisure Centre Business Case Sent For City Deal Approval

Read online: <https://modern.scot/27-8-million-larkhall-leisure-centre-business-case-sent-for-city-deal-approval/>



South Lanarkshire Council has submitted the Full Business Case for Larkhall's replacement leisure centre after the project's budget more than doubled and residents successfully pressed for indoor sports space to be restored to the design.

The proposed £27.82 million replacement for Larkhall Leisure Centre has entered the final City Deal approval process, with South Lanarkshire Council seeking authority to proceed with the main construction

contract.

The Full Business Case has been submitted to the Glasgow City Region City Deal, whose appraisal process will test the project's costs, procurement arrangements, risks and claimed benefits before the City Deal contribution is released.

The submission does not mean that the remaining approval is automatic. Under the City Deal's assurance framework, business cases are examined by an independent appraisal team within the regional Programme Management Office. A Full Business Case must demonstrate that the project remains viable and worthwhile, while approval provides permission for investment and the award of contracts.

South Lanarkshire Council has already selected BAM Construction to carry out the work through hub South West Scotland. Holmes Miller is the project architect, with Blyth and Blyth providing engineering services and Wallace Whittle responsible for environmental building systems.

The new centre will replace a building dating from the 1960s and will contain a 25-metre, six-lane swimming pool. A movable floor will allow the water depth to be altered for swimming lessons, disability access, training and other uses, while tiered seating will provide space for spectators during aquatic events.

The plans also include a gym with cardiovascular and resistance equipment, sauna and steam rooms, a fitness and dance studio capable of accommodating yoga, Pilates and community events, and a three-court games hall suitable for badminton, pickleball and five-a-side football.

Changing facilities are intended to meet current accessibility standards. The architects say the building has been designed around natural light, clear internal routes and flexible spaces that can accommodate users of different ages and abilities.

A Leisure Centre Built Around Housing Growth

The project is being presented as a replacement for an ageing public facility, but its financial origins lie within a much larger housing programme.

Larkhall Leisure Centre is one of seven infrastructure projects within the Larkhall Community Growth

Area. The programme also includes school extensions, nursery provision, new roads and changes to junctions around the A72 and M74.

The original City Deal business case envisaged the construction of 1,750 homes accommodating approximately 5,000 additional residents. Public investment in roads, schools and leisure facilities was intended to allow the housing programme to be completed over 15 years rather than the 25 years expected without intervention.

That earlier case anticipated £238 million of private investment in housing and on-site infrastructure, together with developer contributions and further council spending. The leisure centre is therefore part of the public infrastructure being used to support and accelerate a substantial expansion of Larkhall, rather than an isolated recreational project.

Council leader Maureen Devlin said the facility was an essential part of the infrastructure required to support approximately 1,700 new homes.

“This is the next important step in delivering a brand-new, state-of-the-art leisure centre that the community can be proud of, and which is fit for generations to come,” she said.

“With a now revised budget of £27.8 million, the new Larkhall Leisure Centre will be the most expensive facility, outwith the secondary schools’ programme, that the council has built.”

Budget Has More Than Doubled

The current cost is considerably higher than the £11.9 million funding package previously assembled for the project.

South Lanarkshire Council approved another £12 million in February 2024, increasing the available budget to £23.9 million. A further £3.85 million was authorised in February 2025, principally to enlarge the proposed games hall after residents objected to the earlier design. Minor subsequent adjustments have placed the confirmed budget at £27.82 million.

The council is providing £21.85 million. The remaining £5.97 million is being drawn collectively from Glasgow City Region City Deal funding, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Place Based Investment funding, regeneration funding and a SportScotland grant.

Earlier council papers identified £3 million of City Deal funding, £1.6 million from Place Based Investment, £1 million from the Shared Prosperity Fund and £300,000 from a regeneration capital fund. The council’s current project page lists the funding sources but does not provide an updated amount for each external contribution.

The increase should not be described simply as a conventional construction overrun because the principal contract has not yet begun and the scope has changed. However, it does mean that the public funding required is now more than twice the amount initially assembled.

Part of that increase can be traced directly to public pressure.

Consultation during 2024 found strong support for the pool, gym and fitness facilities, but the absence of a sufficiently large games hall prompted objections from sports organisations and residents. Larkhall Plan Partnership and Larkhall Community Council organised a campaign that collected about 2,000 petition signatures and generated at least 113 emails to the council leader.

The council subsequently approved the additional £3.85 million and revised the plans to include the three-court

hall. The episode provides a clear example of consultation altering a major public project rather than merely accompanying a decision already settled.

The three-court hall will nevertheless be smaller than the indoor sports provision some campaigners originally sought. Community representatives had argued that replacing the existing centre with reduced hall capacity would place pressure on clubs and activities already affected by the loss of other local venues.

Energy Claims Await Measurable Detail

Holmes Miller says the building will use cross-laminated timber, passive solar design, thermal zoning and high-performance materials. It is being developed according to “Passivhaus principles” and is expected to use substantially less operational energy than a conventional leisure centre.

Neither the council’s announcement nor its public project page gives a target for annual energy consumption, a predicted reduction against the present centre or confirmation that independent certification will be sought. Swimming pools are particularly demanding public buildings because water and air must be heated, treated and circulated for long periods. The eventual energy model will determine whether the architectural ambition produces the promised reduction in operating costs.

Although the 14 July announcement says construction is expected to begin during August, the council’s dedicated project page gives a more precise date of 7 September 2026 for the start of the main works, subject to outstanding approvals and agreements.

Advanced work began in mid-May and includes drainage, vegetation removal, site hoardings, construction of a haul road and partial demolition of the existing leisure centre. The intention is for that work to continue directly into the main building programme.

The existing centre is expected to remain partly operational during construction. Games halls and pitches at Larkhall Academy have also been made available for community bookings during evenings and limited weekend hours, although those arrangements cannot provide unrestricted daytime replacement capacity.

The new building is currently scheduled for completion in April 2028. Demolition of the remaining old centre and completion of the wider site are expected to continue until September of that year.

Before the main contract can proceed, the regional City Deal process must determine whether the Full Business Case meets its financial, economic and delivery requirements. The project has passed its local political test. It must now demonstrate that the revised £27.82 million scheme can be delivered within budget and operated affordably once the builders have gone.

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COMMUNITY | 24 July 2026

Spanish Galleon Replica to Open its Decks at Ayr Harbour

Read online: <https://modern.scot/spanish-galleon-replica-to-open-its-decks-at-ayr-harbour/>



The Galeón Andalucía will spend 11 days in Ayr this August, offering visitors a close view of the ships that helped create the first enduring trade routes between Europe, the Americas and Asia. The vessel also carries a history less comfortable than the familiar language of discovery and adventure.

Four masts and almost 1,000 square metres of sail will rise above Ayr Harbour next month when the Galeón Andalucía makes its first visit to South Ayrshire.

The seaworthy replica of a Spanish galleon is expected

to arrive on Wednesday 12 August. It will open to the public from Thursday 13 August until Sunday 23 August, before departing on 24 August. Visitors will be admitted between 10am and 8pm each day at South Harbour Street.

The ship is operated by the Fundación Nao Victoria, a Spanish non-profit organisation that maintains historical replicas as working vessels and floating museums. Its Ayr visit is being supported by South Ayrshire Council and Associated British Ports, which operates the ports of Ayr and Troon.

Although commonly described as a replica of a 17th-century galleon, the Galeón Andalucía is not a reconstruction of one particular named ship. It is a full-sized interpretation of the armed merchant vessels built by Spain and Portugal between the 16th and 18th centuries, drawing upon historical records and the shared characteristics of ships that crossed the Atlantic and Pacific.

That distinction makes the vessel more useful as an exhibition. Rather than reproducing the surviving evidence from a single wreck or set of plans, it demonstrates how the galleon developed as a practical piece of ocean-going infrastructure: broad enough to carry large cargoes, high-sided for defence and fitted with artillery to protect valuable goods.

The foundation's technical specifications give the vessel an overall length of 49.4 metres, a beam of 10.1 metres and a weight of 589 tonnes. Her seven sails cover 965 square metres, while more than ten kilometres of rope are used in the rigging. Ten cast-iron cannons are positioned on each side and the two principal anchors weigh 800 kilograms apiece.

Visitors will be able to explore the ship's decks and displays relating to food, sleeping arrangements, navigation and the handling of cannon equipment. The scale may be impressive from the quayside, but the interior is intended to show how little private space existed aboard the original ships.

A large historic galleon might carry around 150 officers, sailors, merchants, servants, passengers and family members, together with livestock and supplies. The Fundación Nao Victoria estimates that the available living space could amount to approximately 1.5 square metres per person. Privacy was largely a privilege of rank,

while ordinary crew members slept and worked among cargo, animals, ropes, weapons and the accumulated smells of a long voyage.

The replica itself was built at Punta Umbría in Andalusia following three years of historical research, six months of design work and 16 months of construction involving 126 workers. It was launched in November 2009.

Its outward appearance is largely wooden, using iroko, pine and beech, but the underlying hull and deck structure was made from fibreglass before being clad in timber. Steel cables reinforce parts of the standing rigging, and modern engines allow the vessel to travel safely with a far smaller crew than its historical predecessors. It can sail under canvas when conditions permit, although engines are used when the wind is unsuitable.

The ship has since travelled to ports on four continents, including Shanghai, Manila, Singapore, Hong Kong, New York, Quebec and London. Its international voyages mean that the exhibit arriving in Ayr is itself an ocean-going ship rather than a static museum piece.

Councillor Alec Clark, South Ayrshire Council's depute leader, described the visit as "a rare opportunity to experience what life would've been like for people at sea".

Aurelia Peddie, commercial manager for Associated British Ports at Ayr and Troon, said the organisation was looking forward to working with the council to make the ship's first visit to the Port of Ayr "a fantastic and memorable experience".

The trade behind the sails

The exhibition's language of exploration and maritime discovery describes only part of the galleon's history. These vessels were also the machinery of Spanish imperial government, colonial settlement and commercial extraction.

Galleons carried European food, cloth, weapons and tools westwards. On their return journeys, their holds contained silver, gold and other commodities from the Americas. Across the Pacific, the Manila galleon system linked the Philippines with Acapulco in present-day Mexico between 1565 and 1815. Asian silk, porcelain, ivory and spices travelled eastwards in exchange for silver mined in Spanish America. From Mexico, goods could be carried overland and shipped onwards to Europe.

The route was one of the earliest durable systems of global trade. Its influence can still be traced in art, ceramics, clothing, food and language across Asia and the Americas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art estimates that as much as one-third of the silver mined in New Spain and Peru may have travelled towards the Far East.

It was not, however, a neutral exchange among equal partners. The ships operated within colonial economies and depended heavily upon labour that traditional European accounts have frequently placed at the edge of the story.

Research into the Manila trade shows that Indigenous Filipino workers served as woodcutters, shipwrights, navigators, deckhands and soldiers. Many of the Pacific galleons were constructed or repaired with Philippine timber and expertise. Labour could be compulsory, poorly paid and dangerous, while Filipino and other Asian sailors formed a substantial part of the crews required to keep Spain's Pacific routes operating.

Conditions at sea were equally severe. Voyages could last for months, with overcrowding, poor nutrition,

contaminated water and little effective treatment for disease. Historical accounts record high mortality from starvation, scurvy and illness, particularly during the earlier years of the Manila route. Some vessels reached port with only a fraction of their original crews alive.

A visit to the Galeón Andalucía therefore offers more than a handsome ship and a collection of cannon. Its decks provide a physical measure of the engineering achievement, the commercial ambition and the human confinement involved in maintaining routes that crossed entire oceans.

Advance tickets bought by 12 August cost £12 for visitors aged ten and above, £6 for children aged five to ten and £30 for a family ticket covering two adults and three children. Prices then rise to £15, £7 and £37 respectively. Tickets may be available aboard the ship, although the organisers warn that daily capacity is limited and that no further admissions will be sold once a date has reached capacity. Group tours are available on selected weekdays during the visit.

POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 24 July 2026

Shetland Sets Terms For Developers But New Charter Relies On Voluntary Cooperation

Read online: <https://modern.scot/shetland-sets-terms-for-developers-but-new-charter-relies-on-voluntary-cooperation/>



Shetland Islands Council has approved a development charter intended to secure greater local benefit from major investment, including renewable energy projects. It sets expectations on ownership, environmental protection, housing, community benefit and local supply chains, but it does not alter planning law or compel developers to comply.

Shetland Islands Council has adopted a new charter setting out what it expects from companies proposing major developments across the islands.

The Shetland Development Charter was approved by councillors on 1 July 2026. It is intended to guide discussions with investors involved in renewable energy, infrastructure and other large projects before proposals reach the later stages of planning and consent.

Its central argument is that Shetland should receive a proportionate and lasting benefit from developments that use its land, surrounding seas, infrastructure and workforce.

The charter calls for local communities to be heard, environmental impacts to be considered across projects rather than separately, unnecessary duplication of infrastructure to be avoided and investment to leave a legacy for residents and local businesses.

Its nine priorities cover a just transition, ownership, environmental protection, the local economy, a fair share for Shetland, community benefit, local supply-chain participation, housing and changes to fiscal and regulatory arrangements.

Organisations that sign up will be expected to produce a delivery plan explaining how they intend to meet the charter's principles.

Dennis Leask, chair of the council's Development Committee, said early engagement should allow developers and communities to identify opportunities and problems before projects become fixed.

He said the purpose was to ensure that people in Shetland received "a fair share from developments", while stressing that the charter would not replace existing planning or consenting procedures.

What The Charter Can And Cannot Do

The charter is not a new planning law, licence condition or legally enforceable community-benefit scheme.

The council's formal decision expressly stated that nothing in the document could restrict or prejudice its statutory duties or discretion, including its role as a planning authority. The same protection was applied to the new Shetland Energy Programme Sounding Board.

The charter's opening footnote, quoted by Shetland News, says commitments attributed to the council are "purely aspirational in nature" unless the law requires otherwise. Developers are also free to decide whether to sign up.

The charter gives Shetland a common negotiating position and allows the council and its partners to state publicly what responsible development should deliver. It does not provide sanctions against a developer that refuses to participate or fails to fulfil its delivery plan.

Council chief executive Maggie Sandison later described the approach as the council "using influence rather than powers".

She said the authority could ask developers to minimise harm, mitigate consequences and provide community benefits, but could not prejudge individual planning applications or impose requirements beyond its statutory authority.

Charter Replaces Further Work On Energy Strategy

Councillors also agreed that further work on the draft Shetland Energy Strategy should cease. The charter and the Shetland Energy Programme will instead become the principal mechanisms for progressing this work.

The council approved the establishment of a Shetland Energy Programme Sounding Board and delegated authority to amend the charter where later legislative changes make that necessary.

The charter therefore does more than sit alongside existing strategy. It consolidates several strands of Shetland's energy and development policy into a single framework based on negotiation, partnership and voluntary delivery plans.

It will be led through EmPowering Shetland, whose members include Shetland Islands Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, UHI Shetland, Lerwick Port Authority, the Shetland Net Zero Energy Forum and the Norn Engineering Alliance.

That membership brings together local government, education, ports and industry. It has also prompted concern that the body does not include direct representation from affected communities or environmental organisations.

Local reporting said councillors themselves questioned the absence of environmental voices and raised the pressure that incoming construction workforces could place on housing and already fragile transport services.

Shetland's Existing Demand For A Fair Share

The charter builds on positions the council has developed over several years.

Its Shetland Energy Development Principles, approved in 2022, state that communities hosting major energy development should receive direct benefits from the use of local land and sea.

Those principles argue that offshore wind projects in Shetland's sea area should provide community benefit worth £5,000 for every installed megawatt, index-linked, or approximately 2.5 per cent of generation value. The council has proposed a comparable 2.5 per cent approach for oil and gas developments in surrounding waters.

It has also called for benefits to continue throughout the productive life of developments and for local

households and businesses to receive practical help with energy affordability.

The 2024 Fair Share for Shetland report expanded the argument to include local, community or shared ownership, compensation, indirect economic benefits, environmental stewardship and changes to national tax and regulatory systems.

There is already one example of the council translating those principles into a commercial agreement.

Its lease with Statkraft for a proposed green hydrogen and ammonia development at Scatsta includes annual rent of £1.13 million and a fixed community-benefit payment based on £5,000 for each megawatt of installed capacity. The council estimated that payment at about £2 million a year at the time the agreement was announced.

The new charter is intended to make such expectations more consistent across future developments rather than negotiating every principle from the beginning.

Community Doubts Over Enforcement

Reaction among some residents and community representatives has been sceptical.

Frank Hay of Sustainable Shetland said the charter lacked effective community and environmental representation. Andrew Archer, involved in plans for a convention of community councils, argued that voluntary participation was its central weakness.

Critics have questioned how delivery plans will be measured, who will decide whether developers have met their promises and what will happen when commitments are not fulfilled.

Those concerns arise amid opposition to the number, scale and cumulative effects of energy projects being proposed across the islands.

In early July, members of the Association of Shetland Community Councils supported plans for a public meeting seeking a pause on further energy developments until a coherent strategy was in place. The proposal was presented as concern about coordination and community influence rather than opposition to every renewable-energy project.

The charter seeks to answer part of that criticism by requiring joined-up thinking between projects. It says investors should consider the whole energy system, avoid unnecessary duplication and demonstrate that consultation has meaningfully influenced project design.

Its effectiveness will depend on matters the document itself cannot guarantee: whether developers sign, whether delivery plans contain measurable commitments, whether progress is published and whether Shetland's institutions are prepared to challenge companies that fall short.

The council has now stated what it expects from development. The next test is whether those expectations result in affordable energy, local ownership, protected landscapes, housing, employment and durable community wealth—or remain principles accepted warmly at the beginning of a project and quietly misplaced before construction begins.

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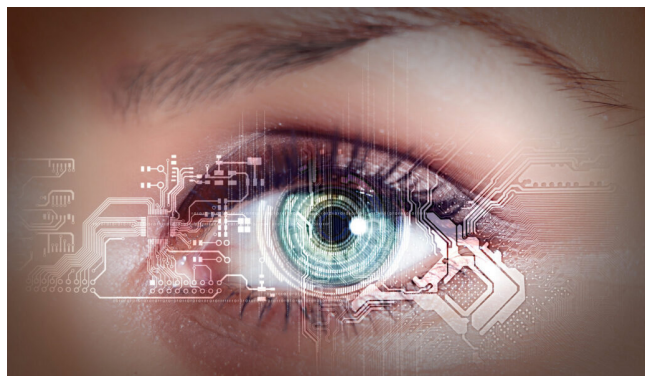
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INFRASTRUCTURE | 24 July 2026

Scotland's Digital Identity System Runs on Amazon Cloud

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-digital-identity-system-runs-on-amazon-cloud/>



ScotAccount now has more than 768,000 registered accounts and processes biometric images during some identity checks. The Scottish Government says the information remains in UK-based Amazon Web Services regions and that photographs are deleted after verification, but it has no ScotAccount-specific migration plan with defined times or costs. Its data-protection assessment did not specifically examine exposure under the US CLOUD Act or the

UK-US Data Access Agreement.

Scotland is building a common digital identity service that increasingly sits between people and the public services they need.

ScotAccount allows one account to be used across Disclosure Scotland checks, NHS Scotland's MyCare service, the Witness Gateway, Scotland's Redress Scheme, debt arrangements, Registers of Scotland transactions, tobacco and vaping registrations, funeral-sector regulation and Legal Aid Online. More services are expected to join.

ScotAccount had just over 768,000 registered accounts at 1 June 2026. Some users need only an email address, telephone number and password. Others are asked to prove their identity using an official document and a live photograph of their face, or by answering questions derived from their personal and financial history.

The system can then retain verified details such as a person's name, date of birth and address, allowing them to reuse that information when applying for another public service. Saving those details is optional, and the government says users can remove them or delete their account.

The Scottish Government presents this as a simpler and more secure alternative to repeatedly proving identity to different public bodies. It can reduce paperwork, duplicated verification systems and fraud risks while giving people one route into a growing collection of online services.

Its core cloud hosting is provided through infrastructure operated by Amazon Web Services.

The government's answer

A Scottish Government freedom-of-information response published on 21 July confirms that ScotAccount is hosted on Amazon Web Services, using UK regions only. It says the data is processed and stored within the UK, while recognising that AWS is subject to United States jurisdiction. The response does not identify the particular data centres involved.

The same disclosure confirms that ScotAccount processes biometric data derived from identity documents

and selfie images. That information is classed as special-category data under the UK General Data Protection Regulation.

The government says the images are used only to complete the identity check and are deleted when the check ends. ScotAccount's privacy notice says the biometric information may be held for up to one week where verification is not completed immediately, although the process should ordinarily take only a few minutes.

The government has conducted a Data Protection Impact Assessment for ScotAccount. It told the FOI applicant, however, that the assessment did not specifically identify and assess the risk of extraterritorial access under the US CLOUD Act or the UK-US Data Access Agreement.

Its explanation was that a DPIA assesses compliance with UK data-protection law and is not intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of every international legal regime that could theoretically apply to a cloud supplier. The response does not identify a separate ScotAccount assessment addressing those laws.

The government also said it holds no separate ScotAccount document assessing the consequences of sanctions, a change in the hosting provider's ownership or withdrawal of service. Officials said they had identified no continuity risks materially different from those already managed for other public services using commercial cloud infrastructure.

Most strikingly, the government confirmed that there is no ScotAccount-specific exit plan setting out how long migration would take or what it would cost. It said high-level exit and portability considerations form part of its general governance and supplier-management arrangements, but there is no plan containing defined timelines or cost estimates.

That distinction becomes harder to dismiss as the service grows. ScotAccount is no longer a small experiment serving one public body. It is becoming shared national infrastructure, with more than three-quarters of a million accounts and a stated role in future health and public-service delivery.

What happens when someone verifies their identity

People using photographic verification are asked to provide an image of an official identity document and a live image of their face. ScotAccount uses Experian and its subcontractor Mitek to check whether the document is genuine, whether the applicant is a real person and whether the face matches the document photograph. HM Passport Office may also verify passport information.

People who cannot use photographic identification may instead be asked questions about bank accounts, mortgages, loans, credit cards or other personal history. Experian generates and checks the answers. ScotAccount says it does not see the underlying financial information and receives only the result of the check. A soft search is recorded but does not affect the person's credit score.

Cifas is used to check for known or suspected identity fraud. ScotAccount also records IP addresses, device information and other technical identifiers for security monitoring. Its current privacy notice says ordinary system logs are held for 12 months, security-monitoring data for six months and a secure audit trail for fraud monitoring for seven years.

The supplier chain therefore extends beyond Amazon. It includes Experian, Mitek, Cifas, HM Passport Office, support-service provider Atlassian and Netcompany, which the government says is building and supporting ScotAccount's digital mailbox. ScotAccount's privacy notice also says personal information collected through Atlassian products for user support may be transferred outside the European Economic Area for processing, meaning the UK-region assurance for the core AWS-hosted service should not be read as applying to every

piece of information handled by every supplier.

Each company is performing a defined task under a different legal and contractual relationship. Some act as processors following government instructions; others, including Experian during certain checks, operate as independent data controllers.

This is not evidence that private companies are free to reuse ScotAccount information for advertising, commercial profiling or unrelated purposes. The government says suppliers receive only the minimum information required and are contractually restricted to providing their services. AWS says it does not use customer content for advertising or marketing and does not ordinarily move it outside the selected region, although exceptions may apply where this is necessary to provide a customer-initiated service or to comply with the law or a binding government order.

The issue is the number of dependencies now supporting one route into Scottish public services.

American jurisdiction does not mean automatic American access

The fact that AWS is an American company does not give United States authorities direct or routine access to ScotAccount.

A valid legal process would be required. AWS says it scrutinises government demands, challenges requests that are overbroad or legally defective and attempts to direct authorities to the customer before disclosing information itself. It also offers customers options to manage their own encryption keys.

The legal exposure is nevertheless real enough to require assessment.

The US CLOUD Act states that covered electronic communications and remote-computing providers must comply with lawful preservation and disclosure obligations for information within their possession, custody or control, regardless of whether it is stored inside or outside the United States.

The UK–US Data Access Agreement separately allows qualifying authorities in either country to seek electronic information directly from covered providers in the other country for investigations into serious crime. Existing domestic authorisations and oversight requirements continue to apply. It is a legal route, not a hidden back door.

The UK National Cyber Security Centre advises cloud customers to establish where information is stored, processed, managed and supported; which legal jurisdictions may apply; what access rights providers possess; and in what circumstances information could be obtained without the customer's consent. It warns that jurisdiction can be more complicated than the physical location of a server.

The Scottish Government knows that AWS is subject to US jurisdiction. What remains unpublished is the specific analysis showing how that exposure has been addressed for a service processing identity and biometric information at national scale.

The cost of becoming difficult to replace

ScotAccount's procurement history shows that supplier dependence is not a theoretical concern.

In 2021, the Scottish Government awarded Newcastle-based Scott Logic a contract worth £6.08 million to provide the Digital Identity Scotland beta service. Six tenders were received. None was recorded as coming from an SME. The contract award was not published on Public Contracts Scotland until December 2023.

In March 2025, the government awarded Scott Logic a further £982,702 contract without opening a new competition. Only one tender was recorded.

The official justification said the development and support work had continued longer than expected. Officials argued that replacing Scott Logic at that stage would cause delay, lose knowledge and experience, and create further costs.

That is a direct description of technological and institutional lock-in: the incumbent had acquired knowledge that government considered too costly and disruptive to replace.

The Scottish Government says it has since transferred software-engineering knowledge and skills into its own team, reducing its reliance on external delivery partners. That is an important safeguard and shows that at least part of the capability has been brought inside government.

The external chain has not disappeared. A separate £2.68 million identity-verification contract was awarded to Experian in February 2025 after one tender was recorded through the UK Government's G-Cloud framework. It includes an option for a further 12-month extension.

Those three identified awards -- the original Scott Logic contract, its extension and the Experian renewal -- have a combined published value of almost £9.75 million excluding VAT. They do not represent the programme's total cost.

A Scottish Government FOI release previously reported a whole-life funding estimate of £45 million for the Digital Identity Programme between 2018 and 2028. Officials said at the time that the figure would be revised once the future commercial model had been settled.

How this can affect people

For many users, ScotAccount may be a genuine improvement. A single sign-in can remove repeated forms, identity checks, paper documents and journeys to public offices. The government says it maintains non-digital routes and that the service remains voluntary.

Some individual online services may nevertheless require a ScotAccount before they will allow access through their digital route. If the account is inaccessible, suspended or cannot be verified, the person may have to use a different route or provide further information before receiving the service.

Concentrating access through one account also concentrates failure. An outage affecting ScotAccount or essential AWS services could interrupt sign-in or verification across several connected public bodies at once. It would not necessarily stop the underlying public services or remove offline alternatives, but it could prevent people from using their normal online route until the system returned.

There is also an equality question. The government's own assessment acknowledges that people without photographic identification, reliable internet access or an established financial footprint may find verification more difficult. Young people, poorer households and residents of rural and island communities can face overlapping barriers involving document ownership, broadband, devices and travel to physical alternatives.

ScotAccount has responded by accepting additional documents, introducing security-question verification, allowing two-factor authentication through landlines and exploring forms of vouching by trusted people or organisations. The government's assessment nevertheless recommends further non-biometric routes and continued protection of offline access.

The available evidence does not show that Amazon or the other suppliers are freely accessing or exploiting

ScotAccount information, nor does it establish that the service is inherently unsafe. It does show that Scotland is turning ScotAccount into national public-service infrastructure without a published jurisdiction-specific risk assessment, a costed and timed exit plan, or enough public detail to judge how access would be maintained during a major supplier or system failure. As more services join, those safeguards should be demonstrated before the dependency becomes too extensive and expensive to unwind.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 24 July 2026

Scotland's Endangered Architecture Left Unmonitored For Two Years As Official At-Risk Register Remains Frozen

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-endangered-architecture-left-unmonitored-for-two-years-as-official-at-risk-register-remains-frozen/>



Historic Environment Scotland froze the official Buildings at Risk Register in September 2024 after a review found that it was incomplete and inconsistently maintained. The consultants did not recommend that it should simply be closed and warned against leaving Scotland without an equivalent system. Almost two years later, the official register remains frozen, while a separate conservation charity has more than doubled the number of Scottish buildings on its own watchlist

from 46 to 88.

Scotland stopped accepting new entries for its official register of endangered historic buildings without first putting a replacement system in place.

The Buildings at Risk Register identified listed buildings and historically important properties that were vacant, neglected, structurally unsound, damaged by fire, open to the weather or threatened with demolition.

It was established in 1990 amid concern about the growing number of listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas that had become vacant and fallen into disrepair. Historic Environment Scotland had operated it as an in-house service since 2015.

Historic Environment Scotland stopped accepting nominations and updating existing entries on 30 September 2024. The website remains accessible, but it shows the position when the service was paused rather than a current national picture.

Its last published count, from January 2024, recorded 2,219 buildings. Since the pause, a historic school, church, tenement, house or industrial building could have become vacant or suffered serious damage without being added. A property already recorded may have been restored, demolished or lost to fire while continuing to appear in its former condition.

Historic Environment Scotland says it is exploring alternative ways to support buildings that are vacant, neglected or at risk of demolition. It has not published details of a replacement official system or given a date by which one will be introduced.

What Has And Has Not Been Stopped

Historic Environment Scotland has not closed and has not stopped maintaining Scotland's statutory list of protected buildings.

The Buildings at Risk Register was a separate service. It identified buildings believed to be endangered, but

inclusion did not create their legal protection.

Listed buildings remain protected under planning law whether or not they appear on an at-risk register. Listed-building consent is generally required for alterations affecting their character, including partial or complete demolition.

The loss is therefore not the immediate removal of statutory protection. It is the loss of a current official warning system capable of drawing attention to deterioration before a building reaches the point at which demolition is proposed.

How Deterioration Can Lead To Redevelopment

A listed building cannot lawfully be demolished merely because another use would be more profitable.

National Planning Framework 4 says proposals to demolish listed buildings will not be supported unless exceptional circumstances are demonstrated and reasonable efforts have been made to retain, reuse or adapt the building.

Planning authorities can consider whether a building is incapable of physical repair, whether restoration is no longer economically viable after adequate marketing, or whether demolition is essential to delivering substantial benefits to economic growth or the wider community.

A building identified early may still be secured, repaired, marketed or adapted. Its condition can be publicised, funding can be sought and prospective buyers or community organisations may have an opportunity to intervene.

If deterioration continues, the position can change. Water entering through a failed roof can damage timber, masonry and interiors. Repair costs rise, while the value of the building as a viable restoration project falls.

That does not automatically lead to demolition consent. Each application must be decided on its own evidence, and the legal protections remain in force.

Deterioration may, however, change the evidence presented to the planning authority. A building that could once have been repaired may eventually be described as physically incapable of restoration or financially uneconomic to save.

If demolition is approved, the historic building is lost and the cleared site can become available for redevelopment. The replacement might be housing, commercial premises, industry, energy infrastructure, transport works or another use.

There is no evidence that Historic Environment Scotland paused the register to facilitate development, or that buildings are deliberately being allowed to deteriorate so their sites can be cleared.

The risk is structural. Listing can restrict demolition, but it cannot repair a roof, secure an abandoned building or find a sustainable new use. Without early identification and intervention, neglect can help create the circumstances later cited in support of demolition.

New Cases Continue To Emerge

Evidence published in July 2026 shows that concern about endangered Scottish buildings has continued to grow during the official pause.

SAVE Britain's Heritage, an independent UK conservation charity, added 42 Scottish buildings to its separate Buildings at Risk register. The additions increased its Scottish entries from 46 to 88, more than doubling the number on its list.

The new entries include Lennox Castle in East Dunbartonshire, two listed Art Deco cinemas in Edinburgh, the former Scottish Ambulance Service building in Glasgow and other vacant or deteriorating properties across the country.

The nominations came from members of the public, conservation professionals and local authorities concerned about the buildings' futures.

SAVE's register is not the official HES register. It is a selective UK-wide campaigning list designed to raise awareness and encourage retention and reuse. SAVE says the information is compiled from public sources and local contacts but is not independently verified by the charity.

The increase from 46 to 88 does not establish that all 42 buildings became endangered after HES paused its register. Some had been vacant or deteriorating for years before they were nominated to SAVE.

It also does not prove that those buildings are already beyond repair. SAVE's purpose is to identify buildings whose futures remain uncertain and to encourage action before they are lost.

The increase nevertheless provides current evidence that buildings requiring attention continued to be identified while Scotland's official register was no longer accepting nominations.

Delay carries its own risk. A building that was repairable when the official register was frozen may have suffered further water penetration, vandalism, fire or structural decline by the time a replacement system begins operating. In some cases, the cost of rescue may already have risen substantially.

The charity's work does not replace the need for an official Scotland-wide system. Its 88 Scottish entries are a small and selective group beside the 2,219 buildings recorded by HES in January 2024.

Who Commissioned The Review

Historic Environment Scotland commissioned the review in 2023.

The published contract said its purpose was to examine the effect of the register in bringing buildings back into use since 2011 and to produce evidence-based options and recommendations informing HES's long-term decisions.

The procurement used an open procedure. Three tenders were received, all from small or medium-sized businesses. Quality carried 60 per cent of the evaluation score and price carried 40 per cent.

The recorded tender values ranged from £27,580 to £29,650 excluding VAT. The contract award notice does not state which figure was the successful price. The contract was concluded on 14 August 2023 and awarded to Harlow Consulting.

Who Owns Harlow Consulting

The contractor trades as Harlow Consulting. Its legal entity is Harlow Consulting Services Ltd, an active English private company incorporated in October 2019 under company number 12246374.

The business was founded by Jennifer Brennan and Clare Vokes, who are its two directors.

Companies House records Brennan and Vokes as the company's two active persons with significant control. Each owns more than 25 per cent but no more than 50 per cent of the shares and voting rights. Each also has the right to appoint or remove directors.

The filings do not reveal their exact respective shareholdings. They record no corporate parent, property developer, land company or infrastructure company as exercising significant control.

There is no evidence in the ownership records that Harlow Consulting had a financial interest in historic buildings being demolished or their sites becoming available for redevelopment.

How Independent Was The Review

The report described the work as an independent external review.

Harlow used desk research, interviews with heritage organisations, a public user survey, follow-up interviews, discussions with HES staff and analysis of register and planning data.

The survey received 120 responses: 95 from people who had used the register and 25 from people who had not. It was promoted through heritage networks and a media campaign that contacted more than 200 publications.

Historic Environment Scotland was involved as the commissioning body. The report's acknowledgements thank an HES project reference group for its support and guidance and state that HES staff "reviewed and corrected draft text".

That disclosed involvement is not evidence that HES ordered the consultants to reach a particular conclusion. It does establish that the report was developed with input and factual review from the organisation that would later decide the register's future.

What The Review Found

The review identified serious weaknesses in the official register.

Only 14 per cent of buildings classed as being at risk had been updated during the preceding year. Twenty-nine per cent had last been reviewed between seven and ten years earlier.

The position varied substantially between council areas. Most entries in Glasgow and Shetland had been checked within a year. In Orkney, 80 per cent had not been updated for at least seven years. In Aberdeenshire, the figure was 73 per cent. More than half of the entries in Argyll and Bute were at least ten years old.

The differences largely reflected where the register's three full-time staff had most recently carried out their rolling programme of surveys.

The review also compared the register with listed-building consent records for complete demolitions between 2011 and 2022. Only 53 per cent of those demolitions appeared on the register.

Other losses could be more difficult to identify, including buildings lost through fire, flooding, gradual collapse, emergency dangerous-building action or demolition without the required consent.

The consultants concluded that the register was not sufficiently complete, current or representative to measure national trends reliably.

They also found insufficient empirical evidence that inclusion on the register had a substantial overall effect

in returning buildings to use. The report did, however, acknowledge anecdotal evidence of a small positive effect.

Most surveyed users were heritage professionals. Eighty-nine per cent used the register mainly to obtain information about a building in which they already had an interest rather than to search for a building to buy or restore.

That did not mean users regarded the service as worthless. Ninety per cent described it as useful or very useful to themselves or their organisation.

The Report Did Not Recommend Closure

Harlow Consulting did not tell HES to close the register.

The report presented five options:

- discontinue the register and redirect its resources;
- maintain it in its existing form;
- make targeted changes to its scope, information and functions;
- redesign it to attract restoring purchasers and greater publicity;
- replace it with a comprehensive cyclical survey of listed-building condition.

The report did not identify discontinuation as the required or preferred outcome. It said the options could be combined or introduced at different stages as part of a wider strategy for Scotland's endangered historic buildings.

Its examination of discontinuation contained substantial warnings.

The report said that without the register or an equivalent Scotland would "become an outlier among the four UK home nations".

It warned that discontinuation could harm HES's reputation, place it at odds with recently adopted national planning policy, weaken opportunities to target attention and resources, and make any future attempt to recreate the evidence base more difficult.

It also said those risks could probably be mitigated only by introducing a convincing replacement strategy, which might cost more than the savings produced by ending the register.

The review therefore supplied HES with reasons to reform the register, reasons to discontinue it and reasons not to leave Scotland without an equivalent.

HES Made The Decision To Pause It

Historic Environment Scotland announced the pause on 30 September 2024.

Its public explanation concentrated on the finding that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the register had a substantial effect in bringing buildings back into use.

The announcement then stated: "HES has therefore taken the decision to pause the BARR".

The pause was an HES decision. It was not an instruction issued by Harlow Consulting and was not identified

in the report as the only course HES should follow.

HES said the pause would allow it to consider alternative approaches and that it remained committed to supporting the sustainable reuse of vacant, neglected and endangered buildings.

The report had been completed in March 2024. HES announced the pause six months later.

Almost two years after that decision, the HES website remains frozen, its downloadable information still represents the position in 2024 and the organisation is not accepting new nominations.

During that period, a separate conservation organisation has found enough concern to more than double the number of Scottish buildings on its own risk list.

That does not prove all 42 newly added buildings have deteriorated beyond repair. It does show why leaving Scotland without an updated official national system is difficult to defend.

What The Register Achieved

The register did not guarantee rescue, funding or legal protection. It provided a public record that could be used by councils, grant bodies, community organisations, researchers and prospective restorers.

The review found that the formal assessment undertaken before a building was added could strengthen a funding application.

Since 2017, HES had approved 23 of 39 grant applications involving registered buildings, a success rate of 59 per cent. The approval rate for applications concerning buildings outside the register was 46 per cent.

The report cautioned that the two groups were not directly comparable because buildings on the register were generally in poorer condition. It nevertheless found that some funding organisations gave additional weight to applications involving a formally recognised building at risk.

Registration could also draw press attention, support a community campaign and influence council action, although the review said those effects were variable and difficult to quantify.

Built Environment Forum Scotland told MSPs in June 2025 that about 22 per cent of buildings historically placed on the register had eventually been demolished. It described the register as Scotland's best available early warning of possible heritage loss while arguing that it needed to be connected to stronger practical action.

The old official register was defective. Some entries were years out of date, its coverage was inconsistent and three members of staff could not maintain a reliable national picture.

The review made a persuasive case for reform. It did not establish that Scotland no longer needed to identify its endangered historic buildings.

Nor did it recommend that HES should simply close the register. It expressly warned of the consequences of leaving Scotland without an equivalent.

HES nevertheless paused the system before identifying its replacement.

Without early identification, a repairable building can become an uneconomic one. An uneconomic building can become the subject of a demolition application. If demolition is approved, the site can be redeveloped after the opportunity to save the historic building has been lost.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 24 July 2026

Scotland's Public-Sector AI Map Is Stored on Microsoft Cloud Outside Scotland

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-public-sector-ai-map-is-stored-on-microsoft-cloud-outside-scotland/>



The Scottish Government has awarded a Finnish software company a £1 million contract to expand the country's central AI-governance platform. Saidot says its service is hosted through Microsoft Azure in Ireland, its contract remains unpublished and the public register still contains only 34 records more than two years after officials said they already knew of more than 60 cases requiring inclusion.

Scotland's official record of artificial-intelligence

systems is not held on Scottish public infrastructure.

It operates from a commercial .com address and was developed by the Finnish company Saidot, which says its proprietary governance platform is hosted through Microsoft Azure in Ireland.

The public-facing Scottish AI Register currently displays 34 systems. It includes projects involving Social Security Scotland, the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, government communications, marine monitoring, environmental planning, pensions and the Emma Caldwell Inquiry. The website describes itself as the place where people can learn how AI is being used or developed across Scotland's public sector. Its footer states: "Service developed by Saidot."

Behind that public website sits something more extensive. Saidot says its wider commercial platform can record AI systems, models, agents, datasets, suppliers, owners, risks, controls and policies. The Scottish Government has said the register is also becoming a central location for monitoring data-science projects and providing public bodies with libraries of AI risks, policies and technical information. It is, in practical terms, an organised map of Scotland's public-sector AI estate.

There is no published evidence that every benefit application, patient record or children's case file processed by the systems listed on the register is copied into Saidot. The platform primarily holds governance information about those systems rather than becoming a central repository for their underlying operational records.

That does not make the information inconsequential. It identifies where AI is operating, which organisations and suppliers are responsible, what datasets and models are involved, which officials own the systems, what risks have been recorded and what controls have been adopted.

Scotland has placed that strategic record on software owned outside the country and cloud infrastructure controlled by Microsoft.

Scottish information held in Ireland

Saidot's current data-processing agreement says its cloud services are hosted on Microsoft Azure and that

daily automated backups are stored in Azure data centres in Ireland. It says all Saidot processing takes place in EU or European Economic Area data centres managed by Azure, while access to its services is logged through Azure Monitor.

Saidot acts as the data processor and its customer acts as controller. The standard agreement covers personal information belonging to authorised users, including government employees, consultants and contractors. Names, email addresses, telephone numbers, usernames, roles and authentication information can be processed, although customers are prohibited from entering special-category or sensitive personal information into the platform.

Microsoft is not the Scottish Government's named contractor and there is no evidence that Microsoft owns Saidot. Its involvement is nevertheless structural. Saidot's service is hosted on Azure, available through Microsoft's commercial marketplace and integrated with Azure AI Foundry, Azure OpenAI, Azure Machine Learning and Microsoft identity and monitoring services. Saidot also supports Amazon Bedrock and external connections, so the product is not exclusively tied to Microsoft, but Azure supplies the cloud foundation used for its standard service.

The result is a two-layer private dependency. Scotland relies upon Saidot's proprietary governance software, while Saidot relies upon Microsoft infrastructure to store and operate the service.

Why the two layers of dependency matter

Hosting the register in Ireland does not by itself make it unlawful or insecure. Public cloud services can provide resilience, security expertise and technical capacity that would be expensive for government to reproduce. The concern is that Scotland does not directly operate either the proprietary Saidot platform or the Microsoft infrastructure beneath it.

The arrangement creates a risk of vendor lock-in. Moving the register elsewhere could require Scotland to rebuild its data structures, identity systems, integrations and governance workflows. The signed contract and technical architecture have not been published, so the public cannot assess the cost or practical difficulty of replacing Saidot or Azure.

A major failure affecting Saidot or the Azure services on which it depends could temporarily make Scotland's central register and governance platform unavailable. That would not necessarily stop the AI systems recorded within it. Public-sector AI could therefore continue operating while the central system intended to document its risks and controls was inaccessible. Saidot says its service uses encrypted backups and disaster-recovery measures, but the standards required under the Scottish contract remain unknown.

The dependence also crosses jurisdictions. Microsoft is an American company, while Saidot says the information is processed in Azure data centres in Ireland. US law can require American service providers to disclose information within their possession, custody or control regardless of where it is stored. That does not give US authorities direct access, and a legally valid demand would be required. It does mean that locating a server in Ireland does not place the information beyond every other legal jurisdiction.

Scotland's direct contractual relationship is with Saidot, while Saidot depends upon Microsoft and other subprocessors. Saidot may remain contractually liable for supplier failures, but liability after an incident does not restore an unavailable service or provide Scotland with the technical ability to repair the underlying infrastructure. Without the signed contract, the public cannot determine what continuity, migration, encryption, audit or supplier-failure protections were obtained through the £1 million award.

A general consultation was not consent to this arrangement

The Scottish Government consulted on the broad direction of its AI strategy between February and May 2020. It received more than 80 responses covering issues including ethics, training, public dialogue and people-centred development. The consultation asked about Scotland's overall vision and approach to AI. It did not ask whether Scotland's central AI-governance records should be placed on a Finnish company's proprietary platform, hosted through Microsoft Azure outside Scotland or operated from a commercial domain.

That consultation cannot reasonably be presented as public approval of the arrangement that followed.

Public bodies do not require individual consent for every lawful administrative processing activity. They can rely upon statutory functions and public-task grounds. The absence here is democratic rather than contractual: Scotland's people were not offered a specific choice over who should own the technology, where the information should be hosted or whether national capacity should be developed instead.

The platform was adopted through policy and procurement decisions made inside government. Its use was then mandated across the public sector on a non-statutory basis from 1 April 2024.

A young Finnish company became the incumbent

Saidot was established in Finland in 2018. Founder Meeri Haataja brought substantial personal experience in AI policy and governance, including an affiliation with Harvard University's Berkman Klein Center during 2019–20. That personal background was not the same as an established corporate record. Saidot's first widely documented AI-register projects were launched for Helsinki and Amsterdam in September 2020, around a year before it entered Scotland's CivTech process.

Scotland's AI strategy had been published in March 2021 under Nicola Sturgeon's government. The strategy committed Scotland to creating a register of trusted algorithms used in the public sector and to improving public-sector adoption through CivTech and innovative procurement.

Saidot entered the resulting CivTech process that year. Eleven tenders were received, including six from small or medium-sized businesses. Saidot won the contract, concluded in March 2022, with a published value of £199,551.67.

The ten unsuccessful bidders have not been named. The government has not published their countries of registration, experience, prices, technical proposals or scores. It is therefore impossible to establish whether Scottish companies competed, who the five non-SME bidders were, whether any competitor had a longer relevant track record or how Saidot's corporate history was weighed during the evaluation.

There is no evidence that Nicola Sturgeon personally selected Saidot, instructed officials to award the contract or had direct discussions with Haataja. The policy was created under her administration; the supplier was selected through a civil-service procurement process whose detailed records remain hidden.

Material errors in the public award record

The official 2022 contract notice contains information that is demonstrably wrong.

It gives Saidot's address as Tekniikantie 2 in Espoo and lists a Finnish +358 telephone number, but identifies the company's country as the United States. It records Saidot as not being an SME and states that all 11 tenders came from countries outside the European Union.

Saidot was a Finnish start-up. Finland was an EU member state. The Scottish Government itself later described the company as a “Finnish start-up”.

The inaccurate information appears in the government’s published award record. The underlying application has not been released, so it has not been established whether the inaccurate classification originated in Saidot’s tender, was introduced by officials or resulted from an error when the notice was entered into the procurement system.

It would be premature to accuse Saidot of providing false information. It is established, however, that the Scottish Government’s official transparency record contains materially inaccurate information about the company that won.

The error also makes the published bidder geography unreliable. Scotland cannot use the notice to determine whether Finnish, Scottish, British, American or other European companies competed.

A procurement intended to create public confidence in AI began with a contract notice that misidentified the winning company’s country and size.

From experimental supplier to £1 million contract

Saidot did not simply build the first register and leave.

A Scottish Government freedom-of-information response published in 2024 said the company had “successfully retained” the work after designing the first iteration through CivTech. The government reported a total CivTech challenge cost of £236,989.17 and a further £97,320 paid by that point to manage, develop and maintain the register and its infrastructure.

By building the original platform, Saidot acquired knowledge of Scotland’s requirements, users, data structure and internal governance processes. That created an incumbent advantage for later work, even without any impropriety. Replacing a supplier becomes more difficult once its proprietary software has been embedded in government operations.

On 17 June 2026, under John Swinney’s current administration, the Scottish Government awarded Saidot a new contract worth £1 million excluding VAT. The contract covers the AI register and governance platform, hosting, maintenance, support, development, onboarding, training, public consultation and stakeholder engagement. Five tenders were received. Quality carried 80 per cent of the evaluation and price 20 per cent. Saidot was the only SME and the only EU bidder recorded in the notice.

Modern Scot could find no Scottish Government news release announcing the £1 million award. The decision became publicly visible through a statutory procurement notice rather than a ministerial announcement explaining the choice of supplier, hosting arrangements or long-term implications for Scottish technical capacity.

The new notice corrects the old classification and identifies Saidot as a Finnish SME. It does not identify the four unsuccessful bidders, publish the contract documents, disclose the duration or name the evaluation panel, approving officer or signatory.

There is no evidence that Swinney personally selected Saidot. The register began under Sturgeon and was expanded under Swinney. Political responsibility for continuing and enlarging the arrangement now rests with his government, but the public record does not identify who evaluated, approved or signed the award.

Saidot remains founder-led and received €1.5 million in external investment from Icelandic venture-capital

firm Crowberry Capital and Finnish investment company Ventic in 2023, with a further €250,000 in programme funding from Business Finland. Exact shareholdings and voting rights have not been published.

Finnish business-information records show that Saidot had 12 employees and turnover of €338,000 in 2024, alongside an operating loss of €978,000. Those figures do not establish that the company is incapable of performing the work, but they show the scale of the new Scottish award in relation to the supplier's latest publicly available accounts. The contract's duration and annual payment profile remain unknown.

Sixty-plus systems were already known

The apparent gap in the register presents a separate transparency problem.

In June 2024, Scottish Government Data Standards Team Leader Shona Nicol told the Open Government Partnership Steering Group that officials were working to incorporate around 60 AI use cases already known to the team.

A formal Scottish Government progress report was more explicit:

“Work is now on-going to get the 60 plus use cases which we are already aware of, on to the register.”

The government was not waiting to discover 60 possible systems. Officials said they already knew about them.

As of 23 July 2026, more than two years later, the public register contains 34 entries. That is at least 26 fewer than the minimum number identified in 2024, and approximately 57 per cent of the stated total.

Some projects may have been cancelled, merged, reclassified or retained only within private governance records. The government has not published a reconciliation. It has not listed the missing cases, identified bodies that have failed to comply or explained how many systems are recorded internally but withheld from the public-facing register.

A May 2026 freedom-of-information response said Scottish Government bodies must record AI use that is not centrally delivered, including projects still under development. It also confirmed that no other central register exists.

That leaves Scotland dependent on a register that the public cannot verify is complete.

The Scottish capacity that was not retained

The original decision was made at a point when Scotland could still have chosen a different direction.

Government could have developed an internally owned platform, commissioned open-source software, created a consortium involving Scottish universities and technology companies, divided the work into smaller specialist contracts or required the successful supplier to transfer skills and technical capacity into Scotland.

It could have used the project to establish a permanent Scottish team capable of maintaining the register, auditing public-sector AI and controlling the infrastructure on which that work depends.

Scottish procurement rules would not have allowed officials simply to exclude Saidot because it was foreign. Contracts must be awarded fairly and without unlawful discrimination. The government did, however, have lawful ways to structure the work around public ownership, open standards, skills transfer, economic

benefit and SME participation.

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TEA WITH GUNNS | 26 July 2026

The TARDIS Is Now Scotland's Most Reliable Form Of Public Transport

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-tardis-is-now-scotlands-most-reliable-form-of-public-transport/>



On Thursday evening, the King and Queen arrived in Glasgow by TARDIS.

This was encouraging.

For years, those of us living in the Highlands have been told that distance is a difficult problem. It affects buses, trains, broadband engineers, hospital appointments, postal deliveries and anyone attempting to obtain a replacement part for a washing machine. The general impression has been that the north of Scotland lies beyond the practical limits of organised

movement.

We now know this is untrue.

The answer is a blue police box capable of travelling through time and space.

This is considerably more efficient. Naturally, it was launched in Glasgow. I would like to know whether the service is available to the public.

Sir Chris Hoy was sent to collect the royal couple. This was sensible. If Scotland has developed a machine able to pass through centuries and galaxies, it should be entrusted to a man who understands both speed and the importance of arriving at the correct line.

I do not know whether he was required to show identification.

The King and Queen emerged safely inside the arena, without replacement buses, engineering works or an announcement explaining that their journey had been delayed because of sheep on the line.

No luggage appeared to have been lost.

This immediately places the TARDIS ahead of several established operators.

There has been no information about tickets. One assumes the royal party travelled first class, although in a vehicle that is larger on the inside, all seating may be regarded as first class. There should be room for a buffet carriage, a quiet coach and a small department dealing with complaints from previous centuries.

The public will need to know whether concessionary passes are accepted.

I have looked at the Transport Scotland website but can find no TARDIS timetable. There is no indication of whether it stops in Aviemore, whether booking is essential or whether passengers in the north will be expected to reach Inverness before using it.

This last arrangement would be familiar.

A rural TARDIS service would undoubtedly begin as a limited pilot. The vehicle would visit three communities on alternate Wednesdays, provided the road was suitable and no one had placed a planter where it needed to materialise.

Passengers would be advised to arrive ten minutes before departure and two hundred years before their appointment.

The booking system would ask for a postcode and then explain that the service was not currently available in the area.

There would be a map.

The Highlands outside of Inverness would be pale grey.

The TARDIS itself would remain in central Glasgow, where officials could observe that demand from Caithness had been disappointing.

A consultation would follow.

People would be invited to identify barriers to time travel. Responses would mention distance, cost and the absence of a ferry. The final report would conclude that rural communities lacked confidence in temporal mobility and would benefit from digital awareness training.

A new strategy would then be launched.

The TARDIS would be renamed the Integrated National Chronological Access Platform.

This would make it sound available.

There would be a photograph of three ministers standing beside it in hard hats.

The box would not move.

Even so, the possibilities are considerable.

A TARDIS could solve the problem of medical letters arriving after the appointment. Patients could simply travel back to attend. The NHS would record a substantial reduction in missed visits, although only after introducing a form to confirm that the patient had not knowingly caused a temporal paradox.

Road repairs could be completed before the pothole appeared.

New ferries could be collected from the future, assuming the future had managed to build them.

Planning applications could be determined during the lifetime of the applicant.

A person attempting to telephone a public body could travel forward to the precise moment when an adviser became available.

Parcel delivery would be transformed.

A driver could leave a package behind a bin on Tuesday, photograph it on Thursday and deliver it to the correct house the previous Monday.

This may already be happening.

The vehicle would be particularly useful for anyone living in a place whose existence is disputed by automated systems.

Our address is recognised by the council, the postman and people who have been here. It is less persuasive to computers. Depending on the website, we live in the Highlands, another district, a nearby village or nowhere at all.

But a TARDIS should be able to manage this because it needs only coordinates and perhaps a willingness to accept that a house can exist beyond the nearest distribution centre.

There would still be difficulties.

A blue police box left unattended in the Highlands would not remain an intergalactic transport system for long.

By the second day, someone would have put a notice on it advertising eggs.

By the end of the week, it would contain a shelf of home-made jam, two knitted hats, courgettes and a biscuit tin for payment.

The door would carry a handwritten message:

■ Back shortly. Please shut properly because of sheep.

Tourists would assume it was an honesty shop.

One would leave £2.50 and travel accidentally to the reign of James VI.

The Commonwealth Games ceremony also included Nessie.

This was less surprising.

Nessie has spent generations avoiding sonar, research vessels and people holding cameras. She was always likely to appear eventually in Glasgow, where unusual creatures can move about without attracting unnecessary comment.

It is possible that she came for the sport.

It is equally possible that someone promised catering.

But a reliable source has told me Nessie was willing to appear in Glasgow because there was paid work. This demonstrates the strength of the city's creative industries.

The ceremony was held indoors, which shows that organisers had learned at least one thing from Scottish history.

Outdoor events in Scotland are planned on the understanding that weather is not a passive background condition. Scottish weather is a participant. It attends rehearsals, alters costumes, removes signage and tests temporary structures.

Putting the event beneath a roof was an act of administrative maturity.

The Games themselves were assembled after Victoria withdrew from hosting. Glasgow took what remained,

reduced it to a manageable size and carried on.

This is also familiar.

It is how most Scottish households prepare for visitors.

You discover on Thursday that fourteen people are arriving on Saturday. You move the laundry, borrow chairs, put more water in the soup and describe the result as intimate.

By the time everyone arrives, there is a monster, a teacake, several pipers and the monarch emerging from a time machine.

No one admits that this was not the original plan.

The royal arrival has nevertheless set a precedent.

Scotland now possesses a proven transport method capable of collecting passengers from distant locations and delivering them indoors on time.

It requires no road, no rails and no visible timetable.

It may not even require the present.

This is an important improvement.

All that remains is to extend the service.

I have completed the consultation form.

I expect a reply sometime in 2047.

Modern Scot - Distinctly Scottish

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