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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 14 September 2026

Scotland, Wales and Ireland's Nationalist Movements Join Forces in Challenge to Westminster Rule

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-wales-and-irelands-nationalist-movements-join-forces-in-challenge-to-westminster-rule/>



SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin sign Cardiff pact declaring 'constitutional change is coming'

The leaders of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin have signed an agreement in Cardiff asserting their nations' right to determine their own futures and calling on the UK Government to prepare for constitutional change, bringing the Scottish and Welsh independence and Irish reunification movements into formalised cooperation.

John Swinney, Rhun ap Iorwerth, Michelle O'Neill and Mary Lou McDonald met at St David's Hotel in Cardiff Bay on Monday, 14 September 2026, before signing a memorandum of understanding between the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin.



The memorandum of understanding signed in Cardiff on 14 September 2026 by John Swinney, Rhun ap Iorwerth, Michelle O'Neill and Mary Lou McDonald, committing the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin to closer cooperation on self-determination and constitutional change. Photo: John Swinney/X.

Swinney attended as SNP leader, ap Iorwerth as Plaid Cymru leader, O'Neill as Sinn Féin vice-president and McDonald as Sinn Féin president. Swinney, ap Iorwerth and O'Neill also hold the offices of First Minister in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively, but the Cardiff agreement was made between their political parties rather than between the three devolved governments.

For the first time in the devolution era, the offices of First Minister in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are held by politicians from

parties committed to fundamental constitutional change.

The three movements are pursuing different outcomes. The SNP seeks an independent Scotland. Plaid Cymru seeks an independent Wales. Sinn Féin seeks Irish reunification, which would end Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom.

Their Cardiff memorandum acknowledges those separate histories, political circumstances and constitutional routes while establishing a common position that the people of each nation should be able to determine their own future.

The document describes the political landscape across the UK and Ireland as changing, says momentum is behind the parties' movements and declares that they believe "constitutional change is coming".

It also states that "Westminster's time is coming to an end".

The parties call on the UK Government to "prepare for, plan, and facilitate constitutional change in each jurisdiction".

They also recognise that their constitutional objectives will proceed separately. Scotland, Wales and Ireland are not placed on a common referendum timetable, and the memorandum does not attempt to create a single legal route applying to all three.

The agreement reaches beyond constitutional arrangements. The parties have committed themselves to closer cooperation on economic development, energy, Europe and international affairs, and state a shared belief that the future of their nations lies within the European Union.

The signing was followed by talks and a joint press conference in Cardiff.

Swinney said he believed Andy Burnham would be the last Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and argued that people in Scotland must be given an opportunity to determine the country's constitutional future.

O'Neill placed the Cardiff meeting within Sinn Féin's campaign for Irish reunification, while McDonald argued that the right to self-determination could not simply be removed from the political agenda by a British government.

Ap Iorwerth approached the agreement from the separate Welsh constitutional position. Plaid Cymru supports Welsh independence, but the party has not placed Wales on the same timetable as either the SNP's proposed Scottish referendum or Sinn Féin's campaign for an Irish unity poll.

The UK Government rejected the suggestion that the break-up of the United Kingdom was inevitable. Downing Street maintained that Burnham remained strongly committed to the Union and said the Government's priorities were household finances and economic security rather than further constitutional referendums.

For the SNP, the Cardiff agreement formalises cooperation with two other nationalist parties at the same time that the Scottish Government is attempting to establish a lawful route through which another independence referendum could be held.

The Scottish constitutional effort has accelerated since the end of August.

On 28 August 2026, the Scottish Government published a new draft Independence Referendum Bill setting out the legislation it intends to introduce if Holyrood obtains the powers necessary to hold another vote.

The draft proposes asking voters the same question used in 2014: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

It sets out the proposed franchise but contains no referendum date. The Scottish Government said when publishing the draft that the Bill would be introduced only once the necessary powers had been secured.

Four days later, on 1 September, the Government placed the pursuit of a lawful independence referendum within its Programme for Government for 2026 to 2031.

The programme also set out an intention to cooperate with political leaders in Wales and Northern Ireland over the ability of their populations to make constitutional choices.

On 10 September, four days before the Cardiff meeting, Swinney wrote to Prime Minister Andy Burnham asking for talks on a legal mechanism through which Scotland could hold another independence referendum.

The letter followed comments made by Burnham at Prime Minister’s Questions that day concerning the circumstances in which another constitutional vote might be considered.

According to Swinney’s letter, published by the Scottish Government, Burnham compared the Scottish position with the mechanism governing a border poll in Northern Ireland.

Swinney quoted Burnham as saying that a Northern Ireland border poll should be considered when there was a clear consensus and public opinion had changed sufficiently for such a call to be considered, adding: “I would say that it is exactly the same situation in Scotland.”

Swinney interpreted those words as recognition that sufficient public support for independence should result in an opportunity to vote and asked the Prime Minister to meet him to establish how such a principle could be converted into an agreed legal process.

The UK Government has continued to oppose another Scottish independence referendum.

When Burnham met Swinney in Glasgow on 23 July 2026, Downing Street said the Prime Minister had made clear that independence and another referendum were “off limits”, arguing that another constitutional vote would divert attention from economic growth and the cost of living.

The disagreement over how Scotland could hold another referendum has a direct historical precedent.

Scotland’s 2014 independence referendum did not take place because the Scottish Parliament possessed a permanent power to legislate for independence votes.

It followed an agreement between the Scottish and UK governments which temporarily altered Holyrood’s legislative competence.

On 15 October 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron and First Minister Alex Salmond signed the Edinburgh Agreement, alongside Scottish Secretary Michael Moore and Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon.

The two governments agreed that Scotland’s independence referendum should have a clear legal basis, be legislated for by the Scottish Parliament, meet agreed standards of fairness and produce a result that both governments would respect.

They also agreed to promote an Order in Council under Section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998 giving the Scottish Parliament the necessary competence to legislate for that referendum.

The resulting Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2013 was made on 12 February 2013 and came into force the following day.

It created a temporary exception to the constitutional matters normally reserved to Westminster, enabling Holyrood to legislate for a single-question independence referendum held before the end of 2014.

The Scottish Parliament subsequently passed the Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013, which received Royal Assent on 17 December 2013 and set polling day for 18 September 2014.

Scotland voted on independence on 18 September 2014.

A total of 3,623,344 people voted, representing turnout of 84.6 per cent.

The result was 2,001,926 votes for No, representing 55.3 per cent of valid votes, and 1,617,989 votes for Yes, representing 44.7 per cent.

The temporary transfer of legislative power used for that referendum did not create a permanent right for the Scottish Parliament to legislate for subsequent independence votes.

No equivalent transfer has since been agreed.

The question of whether Holyrood could legislate for another referendum without Westminster's agreement eventually reached the UK Supreme Court.

On 23 November 2022, the Court delivered its judgment following a reference by the Lord Advocate on whether the Scottish Parliament could legislate for a referendum asking "Should Scotland be an independent country?" without first obtaining additional legislative competence.

The Court unanimously concluded that it could not.

The Scotland Act 1998 reserves matters concerning the Union of the Kingdoms of Scotland and England and the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

The Supreme Court held that legislation for the proposed independence referendum would relate to those reserved matters.

The argument that the referendum would be advisory and would not itself make Scotland independent did not alter the Court's conclusion. The judges found that the practical as well as formal legal consequences of the vote were relevant when considering its relationship with the Union.

The 23 November 2022 judgment remains the controlling judicial decision on Holyrood's present competence to legislate independently for another independence referendum.

The Scottish Government has published, but not introduced, its new referendum bill, saying it will bring the legislation before Holyrood once the powers required for a lawful vote have been secured.

Northern Ireland operates under a different constitutional framework.

Schedule 1 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides a statutory mechanism for a border poll and requires the Secretary of State to order one if it appears likely that a majority would vote for Northern Ireland to cease being part of the United Kingdom and become part of a united Ireland.

No equivalent standing provision exists in the Scotland Act requiring another Scottish independence referendum when support for independence reaches a particular level.

O'Neill attended the Cardiff meeting as a Sinn Féin leader. Irish reunification is not an agreed policy of the Northern Ireland Executive, whose mandatory power-sharing arrangements encompass parties with directly opposing constitutional positions.

Plaid Cymru also approaches constitutional change from a different legal and political position. It supports Welsh independence but does not share either Scotland's previous referendum mechanism or Northern Ireland's statutory border-poll provision.

The Cardiff agreement does not establish a common referendum timetable or a single constitutional process covering Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Instead, the three parties have agreed that each population should be able to determine its future through its own constitutional route and that Westminster should facilitate those processes.

Europe provides another point of agreement.

Scotland voted by 62 per cent to 38 per cent to remain in the European Union in the referendum held on 23 June 2016. Every Scottish local-authority counting area recorded a Remain majority.

Across the United Kingdom, Leave won by 51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent.

The United Kingdom left the European Union on 31 January 2020.

The Scottish Government's current policy is that an independent Scotland should seek membership of the European Union.

The Cardiff agreement places European relations alongside constitutional change, economic development, energy and international cooperation among the areas in which the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin intend to work together.

The events leading to Monday's agreement now form part of a longer constitutional sequence in Scotland.

The Edinburgh Agreement was signed on 15 October 2012.

The temporary Section 30 order followed in February 2013.

Scotland voted on independence on 18 September 2014.

The UK Supreme Court ruled on Holyrood's existing legislative competence on 23 November 2022.

The Scottish Government published its latest draft Independence Referendum Bill on 28 August 2026.

Its Programme for Government followed on 1 September.

Swinney asked Burnham for talks on a lawful referendum mechanism on 10 September.

On 14 September, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin placed their separate constitutional movements within a signed framework for continued cooperation and called collectively on Westminster to prepare for constitutional change.

The Cardiff agreement does not alter the legal restrictions governing another Scottish independence referendum.

No referendum date has been set. No new Section 30 order has been agreed. No permanent power to legislate

for independence referendums has been transferred to the Scottish Parliament.

What changed in Cardiff was the political relationship between the movements seeking Scottish independence, Welsh independence and Irish reunification.

For the first time while politicians from those movements simultaneously hold the office of First Minister in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, their parties have put a common commitment to self-determination and continuing constitutional cooperation into a signed agreement.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 16 September 2026

Westminster Set India Trade Terms as More Than Half of Scotland's £3bn Trade Projection Flows From India to Scotland

Read online: <https://modern.scot/westminster-set-india-trade-terms-as-more-than-half-of-scotlands-3bn-trade-projection-flows-from-india-to-scotland/>



The Scottish Government presented India as a £3 billion opportunity for Scottish businesses. Its own central model tells a more complicated story. Technology and digital services make up £1.994 billion of the £3.20 billion scenario, and the methodology assumes 90 per cent of that trade runs from India into Scotland. That is about £1.795 billion, roughly 56 per cent of the entire model, before any India-to-Scotland trade in the other sectors is counted. The trade agreement that changed the market was negotiated by the UK Government. Scotland could press its interests, but it could not set

the terms.

The Scottish Government's £3 billion India opportunity is not primarily a forecast of £3 billion in new Scottish exports.

That is now clear from the methodology beneath the Scotland–India Strategic Market Insight Report and from a subsequent written response supplied to Modern Scot by the Scottish Government.

The report's central scenario puts annual bilateral activity across four selected sectors at approximately £3.20 billion by 2030. It begins from an estimated existing baseline of about £1.97 billion. The figure includes trade already taking place, future growth and trade moving in both directions between Scotland and India.

Its largest component is technology and digital services. The central scenario assigns £1.994 billion to that sector. The methodology then assumes that approximately 90 per cent of the technology flow is from India to Scotland and 10 per cent from Scotland to India.

On those assumptions, approximately £1.795 billion of the central technology figure is trade flowing from India into Scotland. That alone accounts for about 56 per cent of the entire £3.20 billion central model. The calculation does not include any India-to-Scotland activity contained within energy, life sciences or food and drink.

The largest part of the £3 billion opportunity promoted to Scottish businesses is therefore not Scottish technology being sold into India. It is predominantly Indian technology and digital services being supplied into Scotland. The potential reach of that inward trade is wider than conventional IT outsourcing. The UK–India procurement agreement specifically covers computer and related services as well as telecommunications, and Scotland's implementing rules give qualifying Indian suppliers the same equal-treatment rights as Scottish suppliers when bidding for covered public contracts.

In practical terms, Indian technology companies can compete for qualifying Scottish public-sector IT work on

the same treatment basis as Scottish firms, subject to the agreement's coverage and procurement thresholds. The Scotland–India report itself identifies artificial intelligence, data science, future telecommunications, cybersecurity and digital infrastructure as areas for collaboration, naming Indian technology companies, global capability centres and cloud providers among the potential participants. Scotland is simultaneously pursuing a major expansion of its own AI, computing and data-centre infrastructure. The published methodology does not establish that the projected India-to-Scotland technology flow will supply particular data centres or win particular public contracts, but the route now exists: Indian cloud, AI, telecommunications and computer-services companies are being identified as potential partners while qualifying Indian suppliers have treaty-backed access to compete for covered Scottish public-sector technology contracts on the same terms as Scottish suppliers.

The methodology assumes approximately 90 per cent of the modelled technology trade flows from India into Scotland and 10 per cent from Scotland into India. Applied to the central £1.994 billion technology figure, that is roughly £1.8 billion flowing from India into Scotland and about £200 million moving in the other direction. The Scottish Government has also confirmed that the £3.2 billion central scenario includes existing activity and should not be interpreted as £3.2 billion of additional Scottish exports.

The methodology is also explicit about the uncertainty beneath the technology number. There is no complete official statistical series measuring Scotland–India digital-services trade at the required level. UKIBC therefore applies an estimated 7.5 per cent Scottish share to wider UK–India information technology, business-process-management and telecommunications services trade. It describes that share as a judgement-based scaling factor rather than an official statistic.

The report was published on 30 July, two weeks after the UK–India Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement entered into force. The Scottish Government announcement carrying it was headed “£3 billion opportunity for Scottish businesses”.

The agreement behind the new trading environment was not negotiated by the Scottish Government.

Scotland Was Not at the Negotiating Table

International relations and the regulation of international trade are reserved under the Scotland Act 1998. Scottish ministers can advocate for Scottish industries, provide information to UK negotiators and implement international obligations in devolved areas. Scotland cannot negotiate its own tariff schedule with India or reject a UK trade agreement after assessing its effect on Scottish industries.

The constitutional limit surfaced in unusually direct terms at Holyrood in February.

During scrutiny of regulations needed to implement the India agreement in Scottish public procurement, Gordon MacDonald MSP asked Public Finance Minister Ivan McKee whether India's large textile industry could expose Scottish textile and apparel businesses to lost market share.

McKee acknowledged UK Government modelling showing a 0.7 per cent effect on the sector's gross value added, while arguing that the agreement also offered substantial export opportunities.

Later in the same evidence session, McKee described the position beneath those competing effects: “we were not in the room” when the negotiations took place.

Asked by Stephen Kerr MSP what assessment had been made of additional competition facing Scottish SMEs for public contracts, McKee said there was nothing specific at that stage. He subsequently told the committee that Scotland had not negotiated the agreement and had found out what was in it only at the end

of the process.

The Scottish Government's formal policy note on the procurement regulations records the position still more plainly. The measure was "purely consequential" on the UK–India agreement. There had been no consultation on the Scottish instrument because the international obligation had to be implemented. The policy note states that the Scottish Government had "no substantive discretion in the matter".

Qualifying Indian suppliers are consequently entitled to the same treatment as UK suppliers for relevant Scottish public contracts covered by the agreement. Scottish suppliers obtain reciprocal access to covered Indian procurement.

This does not mean Scottish contracts will automatically move to Indian companies. Before implementation, Indian participation in Scottish public procurement was small. Scottish procurement law also retains sustainable procurement requirements and provisions intended to support SMEs and community benefit.

It means that Westminster negotiated an international obligation which altered the competitive field within a devolved Scottish procurement system, and Holyrood was required to implement it.

The Sector Westminster's Own Model Says Faces the Greatest Pressure

The clearest goods-sector exposure identified by the UK Government is textiles, apparel and leather.

The final UK impact assessment estimates that Indian imports into that sector will increase by approximately £2.9 billion in the long run, about 85 per cent above the modelled level without the agreement. The assessment says some of those imports will replace goods previously bought from other countries. It also says the increase represents additional competition from India.

The same model estimates that UK textile, apparel and leather GVA will be approximately £114 million lower than it would have been without the agreement, a relative reduction of about 0.7 per cent. Of the 23 sectors in the UK model, textiles, apparel and leather show the largest projected reduction.

The model does not predict the disappearance of the sector. It expects it to continue growing over the long term, but to reach a lower level than it would have reached without the agreement.

In Scotland, that category represents 582 textile, clothing and leather business units, approximately 7,400 jobs, £886.2 million in annual turnover and £340.7 million in gross value added in the latest detailed Scottish Annual Business Statistics.

The industry was already contracting before the new agreement arrived. Scottish Government economic analysis found that output from textiles, clothing and leather manufacturing fell 17.5 per cent between the first quarter of 2022 and the second quarter of 2024, the largest fall among the manufacturing subsectors examined over that period.

Its economic geography also differs from that of a nationally distributed service industry. Scottish Government work on textiles has identified particular strength in luxury knitwear and a concentration of employment in parts of the Highlands and Islands and the south of Scotland. It has also recorded shortages of specialist workers and skills that can take years to develop.

That is where a national model encounters the physical economy.

The UK impact assessment assumes that labour and capital move away from sectors adversely affected by the agreement and towards sectors that gain more from increased exports. At national level, that

reallocation helps produce a positive aggregate result.

A specialist mill, weaving business or cashmere workforce does not move between sectors as easily as capital and labour move inside an economic model. Equipment is located in particular places. Skills are held by particular people. Apprenticeships depend on employers continuing to train them. Supply chains can disappear after production has gone.

Those effects are not predictions of what will happen to Scotland's textile industry. The agreement has been in force only since July. They are the economic mechanisms through which the UK Government's own forecast of lower relative textile output would have to occur if the model proves accurate.

The Benefits Are Real. Their Distribution Is Another Question.

The India agreement also creates substantial opportunities for Scottish production.

India's tariff on whisky fell from 150 per cent to 75 per cent when the agreement entered into force and is scheduled to fall to 40 per cent over ten years. Tariffs on salmon were eliminated. Machinery and equipment are among the strongest projected beneficiaries in the UK-wide model.

Scotch whisky is therefore a genuine Scottish industrial beneficiary. Distilling, maturation, warehousing, maltings, bottling, engineering, agriculture, tourism and logistics anchor substantial economic activity in Scotland.

That does not make every pound of additional Scotch sales equivalent to a pound of Scottish-owned wealth.

The ownership of major Scotch producers is mixed. Some important businesses remain Scottish or family controlled. Other large Scotch portfolios sit within multinational groups headquartered outside Scotland. Increased exports can therefore generate employment and supplier spending in Scotland while some of the ultimate corporate return accrues to owners elsewhere.

The textile ownership picture is also mixed. Scotland contains locally controlled manufacturers as well as textile businesses owned by groups elsewhere. The evidence does not support a simple claim that one industry is Scottish-owned and another is foreign-owned.

What can be measured more broadly is the degree to which Scotland's economy is already dependent on externally controlled companies. Scottish Government statistics show that businesses ultimately based outside Scotland accounted for only 3.6 per cent of registered private-sector businesses in March 2025 but 35.9 per cent of employment and 54.6 per cent of turnover.

That is why gross economic output, corporate ownership and retained wealth should not be treated as interchangeable.

The £190 Million Gain Is a Modelled National Total

The UK Government estimates that Scotland's GVA could eventually be approximately £190 million a year higher because of the agreement, around 0.12 per cent above its modelled no-agreement baseline.

That is the principal evidence for an overall Scottish economic gain. It belongs in any complete account of the agreement.

The impact assessment also states that it is measuring the marginal effect of the agreement rather than forecasting the future economy as a whole. Long-run trade modelling carries uncertainty. The Scotland

figure is an aggregate estimate, not £190 million that will be paid to Scottish businesses or households.

It does not identify who owns the additional activity, where within Scotland it occurs, how much becomes wages, how much becomes supplier spending, how much becomes retained corporate profit or whether communities exposed to stronger competition share in the industries receiving the gains.

The model can therefore produce a positive number for Scotland while simultaneously producing a negative relative result for textiles. Growth in whisky or machinery can outweigh lower output elsewhere without transferring any of that gain to the workers, businesses or towns carrying the loss.

What the £3 Billion Headline Actually Contains

The Scottish Government's own India report adds another layer to the question of distribution.

Its central 2030 scenario is approximately £3.20 billion. The subsequent response to Modern Scot says the four sectors begin from an estimated FY2025 baseline of approximately £1.97 billion: £1.238 billion in technology and digital services, £265 million in energy, £210 million in life sciences and approximately £256.6 million across whisky and seafood.

The difference between that baseline and the £3.20 billion central scenario is about £1.23 billion. The £3.20 billion headline is therefore not £3.20 billion of additional business generated from zero.

Nor is it an estimate of £3.20 billion in additional Scottish exports caused by the trade agreement. The Scottish Government's response explicitly says the earlier estimate of around £120 million in additional Scottish exports from a UK–India agreement measures something different.

The £3.20 billion figure is a scenario for annual bilateral activity across selected sectors. It combines existing trade and projected growth, exports and imports, goods and services, and several levels of estimated or proxy-based data.

The technology component determines the direction of the overall number.

At £1.994 billion, technology and digital services comprise about 62 per cent of the central scenario. With 90 per cent assumed to flow India-to-Scotland, the model allocates approximately £1.795 billion to Indian technology services entering Scotland.

That is approximately 56 per cent of the entire £3.20 billion central scenario.

It means that even if every pound in the other three sectors were flowing from Scotland to India (which the methodology does not claim) more than half of the total would still be India-to-Scotland trade because of the technology component alone.

The strongest evidence that the £3 billion opportunity is predominantly inward is therefore not an estimate of containers of Indian goods arriving in Scotland. It is the report's own services model.

Physical goods matter separately. Westminster's impact assessment forecasts total UK imports from India rising by 25 per cent in the long run, equivalent to £9.8 billion against its 2040 baseline, with textiles, apparel and leather showing an 85 per cent increase and the clearest modelled competitive pressure.

Those are two different sets of numbers produced for two different purposes. Together they show why the direction of trade cannot be omitted from the story.

A Trade Bargain Scotland Could Not Make for Itself

The UK Government negotiated an agreement intended to increase trade in both directions. Its own modelling says the UK economy will gain overall, Scotland included. Indian consumers obtain greater access to Scotch whisky, seafood, machinery and other British products. British consumers and businesses obtain greater access to Indian clothing, manufactured goods, technology and services.

The question for Scotland is not whether every inward trade flow is harmful or every outward trade flow beneficial. Economies use imports as well as exports. Competition can reduce prices and improve productivity. Export access can sustain jobs and investment.

The question is who had authority to decide the balance.

Scotland has responsibility for economic development, skills, enterprise support and much of public procurement. It supports the industries that may gain from India and the industries that may face stronger competition.

It did not negotiate the tariff bargain that determined how much access Indian producers would receive to the UK market in exchange for access granted to British producers in India.

When the consequences reach a Scottish industry, Holyrood can respond through the powers it possesses. It can support productivity, training, investment and exports. It can monitor procurement and seek UK trade remedies where the legal tests are met. It cannot independently restore a tariff Westminster agreed to remove.

The long-term test of the agreement in Scotland will therefore not be contained in one national GVA figure.

It will appear in export orders and import volumes, but also in which businesses remain viable, which towns retain manufacturing employment, which apprenticeships continue, which companies win public contracts, where profits are retained and whether specialist industrial capacity survives periods of stronger competition.

The Scottish Government called India a £3 billion opportunity.

Its own model shows that more than half of the central figure is already accounted for by one inward flow: Indian technology and digital services supplied into Scotland.

The UK Government's separate modelling shows that greater inward trade in physical goods also brings identifiable competitive pressure, most clearly in textiles.

Both can coexist with increased Scottish exports and a modelled national gain.

What Scotland could not do was decide the trade-off for itself.

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COMMUNITY | 17 September 2026

£105m Broadband Build Reaches New Aberdeenshire Communities as Scotland Tries to Close Its Rural Fibre Gap

Read online: <https://modern.scot/105m-broadband-build-reaches-new-aberdeenshire-communities-as-scotland-tries-to-close-its-rural-fibre-gap/>



Almost 1,000 homes and businesses around Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen are next in line for full-fibre broadband as one of Scotland's largest publicly funded digital-infrastructure programmes moves through the North East. Behind the local roadworks is a £105 million government contract intended to reach places where the commercial broadband market has struggled to justify building on its own.

New fibre lines are being laid through another group of

North East communities as a £105 million government-backed broadband programme moves from contract and survey work into streets, villages and rural settlements.

GoFibre says construction is now underway in St Fergus, Inchmarlo, Kincardine O'Neil, Collieston and Newburgh in Aberdeenshire, together with Kingswells on the western edge of Aberdeen.

Almost 1,000 homes and businesses are included in the latest phase.

Once completed, the network will be capable of providing full-fibre connections directly to individual premises, with GoFibre selling packages offering speeds of up to one gigabit per second.

The immediate numbers are modest beside Scotland's national telecommunications networks. The significance lies in where the work is taking place and what is paying for much of it.

The North East build is part of Project Gigabit, the UK Government programme created to take gigabit-capable broadband into areas considered unlikely to receive adequate commercial investment quickly enough on their own.

In Scotland, the contracts are being procured and managed by the Scottish Government.

GoFibre was awarded the North East contract in July 2025. Worth £105 million in public funding, it is intended to provide gigabit-capable infrastructure to around 63,000 hard-to-reach premises across Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, Angus, Dundee, Moray, Highland and parts of Perth and Kinross.

The first connections were originally expected from summer this year. Construction subsequently began across communities including Longforgan, St Cyrus, Auchenblae, Montrose and Laurencekirk, with parts of the new network now moving into service.

The latest Aberdeenshire work marks another stage in a build that will ultimately be larger than the government contract itself.

GoFibre says it intends to connect additional properties commercially alongside the publicly supported premises, taking its planned North East network to at least 100,000 homes and businesses.

That combination of subsidy and private expansion is central to the economics of rural broadband.

In cities and large towns, a network builder can spread the cost of ducts, fibre, engineers and equipment across streets containing hundreds or thousands of potential customers. In rural Scotland, the same infrastructure may have to travel much farther to reach considerably fewer premises.

The underlying economics become harder as population density falls.

Public intervention is intended to change that calculation, paying towards construction in locations which might otherwise remain behind while allowing network operators to build outward into neighbouring areas where commercial service can then become viable.

The latest announcement does not identify how many of the almost 1,000 premises in St Fergus, Inchmarlo, Kincardine O'Neil, Collieston, Newburgh and Kingswells are being reached directly through the subsidised Project Gigabit contract and how many form part of GoFibre's additional commercial build.

That boundary matters because the wider North East programme consists of both.

What is clear is that Scotland still carries a substantial geographical broadband gap despite rapid improvement in national coverage.

Ofcom's latest detailed Scotland figures show that 71 per cent of residential premises had access to full-fibre networks by July 2025, an increase of nine percentage points in a year.

That represented another 250,000 Scottish homes gaining potential access to full fibre.

But the national figure concealed a much wider gap between urban and rural Scotland.

Full fibre was available to 76 per cent of urban residential premises and only 50 per cent of rural ones. Gigabit-capable coverage, which includes some technologies other than fibre running all the way into the property, reached 89 per cent in urban Scotland but only 51 per cent in rural areas.

Scotland also remained the UK nation with the lowest overall proportion of residential premises covered by full fibre.

The gap is narrowing. Rural full-fibre availability increased by eight percentage points in the year covered by Ofcom's report, and rural take-up where full fibre was available was considerably stronger than in cities.

About 60 per cent of Scottish rural premises able to order full fibre had taken a service, compared with 40 per cent in urban areas.

That suggests the remaining problem is not simply persuading rural households to buy faster broadband once it reaches them. In many places it is still getting the physical network there at all.

For villages such as Collieston or Kincardine O'Neil, broadband infrastructure has increasingly become part of the same economic calculation as transport, electricity and mobile coverage.

A poor connection affects more than entertainment.

Cloud accounting, card payments, agricultural systems, tourism bookings, remote professional work, online public services, security systems and ordinary communications now assume the presence of stable digital

infrastructure. The effect is particularly noticeable for small businesses which may be operating from farms, workshops or homes rather than purpose-built commercial premises.

The expansion of home working since 2020 has added another reason for broadband quality to affect where people can realistically live.

That gives fibre investment a demographic dimension in areas facing population ageing or the loss of younger working residents. A village cannot reverse those pressures with broadband alone, but weak connectivity can become another reason for businesses and workers to locate elsewhere.

The government programme is therefore intervening in a market failure with economic consequences extending beyond internet speeds.

The financial structure behind GoFibre's Scottish expansion is also more complex than the £105 million public contract alone.

In August 2025, the Scottish National Investment Bank announced a £125 million financing package supporting GoFibre's delivery of Project Gigabit and wider fibre construction in Scotland.

The package consisted of a £45 million debt facility from the publicly owned investment bank and £80 million from Hamburg Commercial Bank.

The financing was intended to support more than 130,000 premises being built by GoFibre across Scotland, including the North East contract and a separate Project Gigabit programme covering the Borders and East Lothian.

GoFibre is also backed by Gresham House's British Sustainable Infrastructure Funds.

The result is an infrastructure programme assembled from several different forms of capital: direct government subsidy for uneconomic premises, debt provided partly by a Scottish public investment institution, international bank finance and private infrastructure investment.

That money is supporting an independent network operator rather than extending only the infrastructure of the established national telecoms companies.

GoFibre was founded in Duns in the Scottish Borders in 2017 and is headquartered in Edinburgh. By July this year it said its network passed more than 135,000 premises across northern and eastern Scotland and northern England.

The company has already used Project Gigabit contracts south of the border, completing builds in North Northumberland and Durham-Teesdale before the larger Scottish programmes moved into construction.

Its North East contract is considerably larger.

The Scottish Government described the £105 million award as covering some of the most rural parts of the seven local-authority areas involved. Building Digital UK records the same contract at approximately 63,000 premises.

Neither figure means every property across those council areas will receive GoFibre.

Project Gigabit works from address-level intervention areas, targeting particular premises rather than giving a provider responsibility for an entire local authority.

Existing commercial networks, planned private builds and other government programmes can all sit alongside it.

The history of publicly supported broadband in Scotland already stretches back through the Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband programme and the Scottish Government's Reaching 100% programme.

R100 alone has involved more than £600 million of investment from the Scottish and UK governments and BT, with more than 96,000 connections enabled for faster broadband by the latest government count.

Project Gigabit is now building on that infrastructure with a different threshold: the objective is no longer merely to provide what was once regarded as superfast broadband, but to push gigabit-capable networks into the remaining harder-to-reach areas.

The change reflects how quickly expectations have moved.

A 30 megabit-per-second connection was once the target for modern broadband intervention. Full fibre can provide services measured in hundreds of megabits or a gigabit, with significantly more capacity available as equipment develops.

The fibre being placed in the ground now is therefore expected to remain useful long after the current retail speed packages have changed.

There is still a difference between a fibre cable passing a property and a customer actually using it.

Once construction is complete, residents and businesses have to order a service. The publicly funded programme creates access to the network; it does not provide every household with a free broadband subscription.

That distinction has become increasingly important as national coverage rises.

Ofcom found that only 43 per cent of Scottish premises able to obtain full-fibre service were actually using one in July 2025, although take-up was rising quickly.

The North East programme is now moving into the stage where those national percentages become decisions at individual addresses.

In St Fergus, Inchmarlo, Kincardine O'Neil, Collieston, Newburgh and Kingswells, the first visible sign is construction.

Behind it sits a £105 million public contract, £125 million of associated financing and a commercial plan intended to stretch the resulting network beyond the addresses government is directly paying to reach.

For almost 1,000 more North East properties, that infrastructure is now arriving at the roadside.

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ECONOMY | 17 September 2026

£50 Billion Behind the Tax Argument: What Is Really at Stake in the North Sea

Read online: <https://modern.scot/50-billion-behind-the-tax-argument-what-is-really-at-stake-in-the-north-sea/>



The offshore industry says 111 oil and gas projects representing £50 billion of potential private investment could move forward under a different tax and regulatory regime. The projects are not committed investment, and the figure comes from the industry pressing for earlier tax reform. What sits behind it is a much larger argument over how quickly North Sea production, jobs and capital spending will decline.

A figure of £50 billion has entered the argument over the future of the North Sea weeks before the UK

Budget, attached to 111 oil and gas projects which the offshore industry says could proceed if the government changes the tax and regulatory conditions surrounding the basin.

The number is large enough to suggest an investment boom.

It requires more careful reading.

The £50 billion is not money already committed to Scotland or the wider UK Continental Shelf. It is an estimate produced from project information supplied by companies represented by Offshore Energies UK, the industry body whose members span oil and gas, offshore wind, carbon capture, hydrogen and the supply chain.

OEUK says the 111 projects could become economically viable under a more favourable fiscal and regulatory framework.

Together they contain an estimated 3.5 billion barrels of oil-equivalent reserves and resources, according to the organisation's 2026 Business Outlook.

Around £25 billion of the identified investment and approximately 1.3 billion barrels of oil equivalent are associated with gas projects.

The industry wants the government to alter the timetable governing the Energy Profits Levy, the additional tax introduced in 2022 after oil and gas prices rose sharply following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The levy now stands at 38 per cent.

Combined with the existing 30 per cent ring-fence corporation tax and 10 per cent supplementary charge, it produces a headline tax rate of 78 per cent on upstream profits, although actual tax liabilities depend on company circumstances, expenditure, allowances and taxable profit.

Under current policy, the Energy Profits Levy is scheduled to end no later than 31 March 2030.

It can end earlier if the Energy Security Investment Mechanism is triggered by sustained lower oil and gas prices.

The government has already designed the system intended to replace it.

Draft legislation published in July establishes a permanent Oil and Gas Revenue Levy which would operate only when commodity prices exceed specified thresholds. The proposed starting points are \$90 a barrel for oil and 90 pence a therm for gas, with the thresholds subsequently adjusted for inflation.

Where realised prices exceed those levels, the new levy would tax the revenue above the threshold at 35 per cent.

Under the government's present timetable, that regime will begin only when the Energy Profits Levy ends.

OEUK wants the change brought forward.

Its argument is that maintaining the existing levy until 2030 will discourage investment during the years in which operators are deciding whether ageing North Sea infrastructure and undeveloped discoveries still justify further capital.

The organisation says earlier reform could unlock the £50 billion project pipeline, sustain tens of thousands of jobs and produce more tax revenue over time than would be collected if investment continues to fall.

Those are industry projections rather than government forecasts.

That is particularly important because the tax debate is being conducted inside a basin that is already declining for geological reasons irrespective of tax policy.

The North Sea is mature. Fields discovered decades ago have depleted, production has fallen and infrastructure built around much larger volumes is becoming more expensive to maintain as throughput declines. No tax regime can restore the basin to the scale of its peak years.

Fiscal policy can, however, affect decisions at the margin: whether a smaller discovery is developed, whether an existing field receives further investment, whether ageing infrastructure remains open long enough to serve surrounding projects and whether capital is allocated to the UK Continental Shelf or to assets elsewhere.

OEUK argues those decisions are now accumulating.

Its Business Outlook says domestic oil and gas production has fallen substantially in recent years and that, without further investment, the decline will accelerate towards the end of the decade.

The consequences extend beyond the companies that hold production licences.

Scotland contains much of the industrial system surrounding the UK Continental Shelf.

Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire remain the centre of a supply chain built around subsea engineering, drilling, inspection, maintenance, vessels, aviation, logistics, fabrication, professional services and offshore operations.

The industry's geographical reach extends through ports and businesses elsewhere in Scotland, including the Highlands, Moray, Fife and the central belt.

OEUK says the broader UK offshore energy sector contributed £36.2 billion in gross value added in 2024 and

supported about 241,000 jobs when oil and gas and offshore wind are considered together.

Its Scottish election material put 128,400 of those jobs in Scotland and attributed around £24 billion of economic value to the Scottish part of the offshore energy economy.

Those figures cover more than oil and gas and should not be read as the employment or economic value of North Sea petroleum production alone.

They do show how deeply the offshore economy is embedded in Scotland.

The central economic risk is not simply the disappearance of jobs on production platforms.

A declining project pipeline affects engineering companies deciding how many apprentices to recruit, vessel operators deciding whether to retain capacity, fabrication yards bidding for work, ports investing in infrastructure and specialist businesses deciding whether their next contract is likely to come from Scotland or another offshore market.

The same supply chain is expected to participate in offshore wind, carbon capture and storage, hydrogen and decommissioning.

That creates an unusual transition problem.

A rapid loss of oil and gas work can remove companies and skilled workers that government and industry expect to redeploy into the industries intended to replace it.

Continued oil and gas investment, meanwhile, carries its own consequences for emissions and the pace of the energy transition.

The government has chosen a tax structure intended to balance those pressures.

Its proposed Oil and Gas Revenue Levy is designed to collect additional tax when prices are unusually high while remaining inactive at lower prices, replacing the temporary profit-based levy with a more predictable mechanism.

HM Revenue and Customs says the objective is to ensure the UK receives a return from unusually high commodity prices while providing greater certainty for investment.

OEUK accepts the principle of the replacement mechanism. Its disagreement is increasingly about when it should begin. The organisation argues that waiting until 2030 leaves four more years in which projects can be postponed, reduced or abandoned. Its latest calculations say earlier reform could raise more tax rather than less.

One OEUK analysis estimates that reforming the present system earlier could increase receipts by around £15.7 billion over ten years compared with its projection under the existing path. That estimate combines corporation tax, payroll taxes, receipts from the future price mechanism and wider economic effects.

Another current submission to government puts the potential investment at £50 billion and the associated additional economic value at around £70 billion.

These figures should not be treated as guaranteed returns.

They depend on assumptions about oil and gas prices, production, company investment decisions, project costs, employment, tax liabilities and the response of operators to changes in policy.

The companies providing the underlying project information also have a direct commercial interest in a lower and more predictable tax burden.

The alternative position is that the windfall levy was imposed because exceptional commodity prices generated exceptional profits and that removing it earlier would reduce taxation of a highly profitable industry while extending fossil-fuel development during a period in which the UK has committed to reducing emissions.

The present government position does not abolish additional taxation.

It replaces the Energy Profits Levy with a mechanism that activates when prices rise above defined levels.

That means the approaching decision is less binary than an argument between taxing and not taxing North Sea producers.

It concerns the timing and structure of the additional tax, the investment response to it, and how much continuing production the government expects from a basin whose output is already falling.

There is also a trade dimension. As domestic production declines, the UK becomes more dependent on imported energy unless demand falls at the same pace.

OEUK says the UK imported more than 40 per cent of its energy in 2025. Its modelling argues that declining domestic gas production could substantially increase reliance on liquefied natural gas during the 2030s. The organisation says investment in the 111 identified projects could reduce that dependency.

The economic effect of imports is straightforward even where the wider energy-security argument is contested: money used to purchase imported oil and gas leaves the domestic economy rather than supporting production, wages, profits and tax receipts within the UK.

That does not mean additional North Sea production would make household energy cheap.

Oil and gas are traded in international markets, and domestic production does not isolate British consumers from global prices.

The direct Scottish economic case therefore rests more heavily on investment, employment, supply-chain activity, tax revenues and the rate at which an existing industrial base contracts.

That contraction has already begun.

Operators have reduced spending, companies have announced redundancies and businesses throughout the north-east are attempting to position themselves for an energy system in which oil and gas production declines while offshore wind and other low-carbon industries expand.

The speed at which the new work arrives remains critical.

Modern Scot has previously reported warnings that clean-energy employment has not yet expanded quickly enough to replace every job being lost from oil and gas. The new £50 billion project estimate adds another dimension to that transition.

It identifies capital that the existing industry says could still be spent before the basin declines further.

The government now has to decide whether the economic activity forecast by the industry justifies changing a tax timetable that was itself designed to capture revenue from exceptional fossil-fuel profits.

The next formal point in that argument is 28 October, when the UK Budget will be delivered.

The £50 billion figure will inevitably sit near the centre of the industry's case.

It should not be mistaken for a cheque waiting to be collected.

It is a calculation of what companies say they might invest if the conditions change... attached to 111 projects in a basin where the window for making those decisions is becoming shorter.

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ECONOMY | 17 September 2026

Strike at Europe's Largest and Oldest Grain Distillery in Scotland Puts Diageo Restructuring Under Pressure

Read online: <https://modern.scot/strike-at-europes-largest-and-oldest-grain-distillery-in-scotland-puts-diageo-restructuring-under-pressure/>



More than 100 workers at Europe's largest and oldest grain distillery are preparing for three weeks of industrial action as Diageo restructures its global business and reviews jobs across Scotland. The dispute brings the company's billion-dollar cost-cutting programme into one of the industrial sites on which its Scotch whisky business depends.

Production at Diageo's Cameronbridge distillery in Fife, Scotland faces three weeks of disruption after workers voted for strike action in a dispute over

proposed job cuts, bringing the effects of the drinks group's global restructuring programme directly into its Scottish manufacturing operations.

More than 100 Unite members are due to begin action on 28 September. All participating workers are expected to strike on the opening day before groups of distillation and process controllers, machine and distillery operators, technicians, engineers, quality-control analysts and process chemists take successive action through to 15 October.

Unite says the pattern has been designed to bring production at Cameronbridge to a standstill.

Whether the disruption reaches that scale will depend on Diageo's operational response, but the industrial significance of the site is not in doubt.

Cameronbridge employs around 200 people and is described by the union as Europe's largest grain distillery. Diageo has previously described it as its largest distillery and a major production centre for grain whisky used in brands including Johnnie Walker, as well as spirits including Smirnoff, Gordon's and Tanqueray.

More than 70 roles at the site are under review, according to Unite.

The dispute is part of a much wider reorganisation taking place inside Diageo.

The group, one of the world's largest alcoholic drinks companies, is restructuring its operations around a programme intended to reduce costs by approximately \$1 billion a year. It plans to spend about \$1.2 billion carrying out the changes over two years.

Around \$850 million of the eventual annual savings are expected to come from a redesigned operating structure, with approximately another \$150 million coming from changes to the supply chain.

By the beginning of September, Diageo said it expected to have implemented around 90 per cent of its planned restructuring changes.

The programme reaches far beyond Scotland. Diageo operates more than 110 manufacturing sites and sells more than 200 brands across around 180 countries and territories. It employed more than 27,500 people globally at the end of its latest financial year.

Scotland remains unusually important within that system.

Diageo says it directly employs more than 3,000 people in Scotland and owns 31 Scotch whisky distilleries alongside bottling, warehousing and other production facilities. Its latest gender pay reporting put employment in the Diageo Scotland legal entity at 3,405 people.

That makes the proposed reductions more than a dispute affecting one Fife workplace. They form part of a restructuring exercise passing through one of Scotland's largest private manufacturing employers and an industry that connects production sites with farming, maltings, engineering, haulage, warehousing, packaging, cooperage, ports and tourism.

Unite says hundreds of Scottish jobs are affected by Diageo's proposals across the country. It has accused the company of failing to provide sufficient detail about the proposed redundancies at Cameronbridge and has raised concerns about removing posts without an equivalent reduction in expected production.

Those are union claims and are contested within an industrial dispute. The company's published financial statements provide a different view of the pressures driving the restructuring.

Diageo entered the programme after a period in which its global sales weakened and parts of the drinks market became more difficult.

Reported net sales for the year to 30 June 2026 were \$19.64 billion, down 3 per cent from the previous year. Organic net sales fell 2 per cent.

North America and Asia Pacific were among the weaker parts of the business, while Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa performed more strongly.

Reported operating profit fell by 27.2 per cent to \$3.16 billion.

That number, however, includes large restructuring and impairment charges and does not mean the underlying business suffered an equivalent collapse in trading profitability.

Operating profit before exceptional items was \$5.68 billion. On an organic basis it increased by 2 per cent, helped by cost savings.

Diageo incurred about \$900 million of restructuring charges during the financial year, including approximately \$752 million associated with implementation of its new operating framework. It also recorded around \$1.5 billion of impairment charges, largely connected with its Turkish business and the value of several brands and assets.

The company is therefore restructuring from a position that combines falling reported sales and substantial exceptional costs with continued underlying operating profits measured in billions of dollars.

That combination lies behind much of the industrial argument now reaching Cameronbridge.

For management, the restructuring is intended to make Diageo more competitive, reduce duplication and produce a simpler global organisation capable of generating better returns while releasing money for investment.

For the union, the continued profitability of the company weakens the case for removing jobs from established production operations.

The disagreement is particularly sharp at a plant where the proposed reductions are being considered without, according to Unite, a corresponding reduction in production expectations.

Cameronbridge is not an interchangeable office operation.

Grain distilleries occupy a particular place within Scotch whisky production. Malt whisky is made in batches in pot stills, while grain spirit can be produced continuously and at very large scale. It provides the base spirit used alongside malt whiskies in blended Scotch, the category responsible for much of the volume sold internationally.

The Fife site has developed around that scale.

Diageo invested £65 million in a bioenergy and water-treatment facility at Cameronbridge more than a decade ago. The company said the system was designed to supply as much as 95 per cent of the distillery's energy requirements through biomass combustion and anaerobic digestion while recovering water used during production.

In 2022 the company described Cameronbridge as the largest whisky and alcohol distillery to receive certification under the Alliance for Water Stewardship standard.

The size of the installation reflects the industrial volumes moving through the site.

Its output supports products sold far beyond Scotland, which means a prolonged interruption can move through supply chains that extend from distillation into maturation, blending, bottling and distribution.

That does not mean supermarket shelves will immediately empty if production stops for several weeks. Scotch whisky is matured for years and the industry maintains extensive stocks. Production and supply chains operate over long time horizons.

A loss of output at a high-volume grain distillery can nevertheless create operational consequences that are different from those produced by disruption at a smaller site.

Diageo's restructuring is taking place against a difficult wider period for Scotch whisky.

The industry remains one of Scotland's most important exporters, but producers have faced weaker demand in some international markets, high financing and inventory costs, changing consumer behaviour and repeated uncertainty over international trade.

Whisky requires capital long before it produces revenue. Spirit distilled today may remain in a warehouse for years before it can be sold. Companies therefore have to make production and staffing decisions against expectations of demand that extend far beyond the current quarter.

Large producers have responded by reviewing costs, inventories and investment while seeking to protect established global brands.

For Diageo, the restructuring extends across that global system. Scotland is one part of it, but it is a part containing production assets that cannot simply be moved from one country to another if the product is to remain Scotch whisky.

By law, Scotch must be distilled and matured in Scotland.

The workforce therefore sits inside an unusual economic relationship. Global management can alter corporate structures, administrative functions and investment priorities across continents, but much of the physical production behind the company's Scotch portfolio remains rooted in specific Scottish sites.

Cameronbridge has been one of those sites for generations.

The present dispute places the future shape of that workforce against the company's effort to reduce costs globally.

Diageo says its restructuring will generate approximately \$1 billion in annual savings and allow money to be reinvested in innovation and competitiveness while protecting underlying profitability.

Unite says workers in Scotland are being asked to bear part of the cost.

Unless an agreement is reached before 28 September, that disagreement will move from consultation papers and restructuring plans onto the production floor at Cameronbridge.

For three weeks, the economics of one of the world's largest drinks companies will meet the people operating one of Scotland's largest distilleries.

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ENVIRONMENT | 17 September 2026

Autumn Rain Returns but Eastern Scotland's Rivers Remain in Significant Water Scarcity

Read online: <https://modern.scot/autumn-rain-returns-but-eastern-scotlands-rivers-remain-in-significant-water-scarcity/>



Four areas of eastern Scotland remain at the highest level of SEPA's water-scarcity system despite the return of rain, with 136 abstraction licences temporarily restricted and one Fife river gauge having recorded its second-lowest flow in six decades.

Rain has returned to Scotland, rivers have risen in places and some catchments that spent part of the summer under severe pressure have recovered. Along sections of the east coast, the dry season has not ended with the weather.

Stonehaven, the North Esk, North Fife and the East Neuk of Fife are at Significant Water Scarcity in the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's latest published weekly assessment, dated 10 September.

The classification is the highest level in SEPA's water-scarcity system. It is reached when representative river flows remain exceptionally low for 30 consecutive days.

Temporary restrictions are now applying to 136 licences allowing water to be taken from the environment in the four affected areas, primarily for agriculture.

The restrictions are not an indication that public drinking water is about to run out. SEPA's scarcity system measures pressure on rivers, burns, groundwater and the wider water environment. Scottish Water manages the public mains supply separately.

What the restrictions show is that parts of eastern Scotland have remained dry for long enough that rainfall measured over days is competing with a deficit accumulated over months.

Fife provides the clearest example.

North Fife and the East Neuk first reached Significant Scarcity on 28 July after river flows had remained below the recognised low-flow threshold for 30 consecutive days. SEPA imposed restrictions affecting 99 abstraction licences, most of them supporting agricultural activity.

Rain subsequently raised river flows enough for both areas to leave Significant Scarcity in early August.

The recovery did not last.

Very low flows returned and persisted. By 10 September, both parts of Fife had crossed the 30-day threshold again and entered Significant Scarcity for a second time in the same summer.

On the River Eden, the Kemback gauging station has supplied one of the starkest measurements of the year. Earlier this summer it recorded its second-lowest flow in a record extending back 60 years.

The river runs through one of Scotland's most intensively farmed regions, where surface water is an economic resource as well as an environmental one. Vegetable and other irrigated crops require water at particular points in their growing cycle, creating concentrated seasonal demand in catchments that can already be naturally drier than much of western Scotland.

By September, much of the main irrigation season had passed, reducing immediate demand for many growers. That does not remove the underlying hydrological problem. Different crops require water at different stages, and some businesses continue to depend on authorised abstraction after the main summer irrigation period.

SEPA's restrictions remain tied to river conditions rather than the calendar.

The regulator monitors rainfall, groundwater, soil moisture and river flows, but the move into Significant Scarcity is based on sustained river behaviour. Its Drought Risk Assessment Tool tracks the number of consecutive days that flows at long-established gauging stations remain below a recognised low-flow threshold known as Q95.

Once that period reaches 30 days, regulatory action can follow.

Restrictions are intended to prevent already depleted rivers from being reduced further by authorised abstraction. Some uses are treated differently under SEPA guidance, including drinking-water supplies, groundwater abstraction, low-volume activities and certain operations where water is quickly returned to the same watercourse.

The system has become increasingly familiar to Scottish farmers and other businesses that rely directly on rivers and burns.

In 2022, SEPA temporarily suspended abstraction licences because of Significant Water Scarcity for the first time. Restrictions were imposed again in parts of Scotland during 2023. The mechanism that had existed largely as contingency planning has increasingly become part of summer water management.

This year the pressure has moved around the country as rainfall patterns changed.

At different points over the summer, Significant Scarcity has affected areas of the Borders, Aberdeenshire, Tayside, Dumfries and Galloway and Fife. More than 170 authorisations were affected by restrictions at the peak of the regulatory response in August.

Some rivers subsequently recovered.

Upper Tweed and Mid Tweed and Lauderdale had moved out of Significant Scarcity by the 10 September report. The Earn, Almond and Dee in Galloway also improved, while the Nith and Clyde returned to normal conditions.

Eastern Scotland continued to behave differently.

Ground conditions remained dry and groundwater levels were described by SEPA as very low for the time of year. Those deeper stores respond more slowly than a river can respond to a storm.

That helps explain an apparent contradiction familiar from recent Scottish weather: heavy rain, or even local flooding, can occur while a catchment remains in water scarcity.

A short period of intense rainfall can raise a river rapidly and produce surface-water problems without replenishing soil moisture and groundwater accumulated over a much longer period. If the river then falls

again, the broader deficit remains.

SEPA had recorded Significant Scarcity somewhere in Scotland in each of six consecutive weekly reports by the beginning of September. The latest report continued that sequence.

The weather record also shows why national rainfall totals can conceal what is happening in individual eastern catchments.

Scotland as a whole received close to its usual rainfall over summer 2026, but the distribution was highly uneven. July brought only about 41 per cent of average rainfall across Scotland, with meaningful rain concentrated mainly in the north and west. In August, eastern Scotland received about 70.6mm, around 73 per cent of its 1991-2020 average.

East Lothian had already recorded only 59 per cent of its average rainfall during June.

SEPA says parts of Fife have accumulated below-average rainfall since March.

The result is not simply a dry riverbed. Low flows reduce the volume of habitat available to aquatic species and leave less water to absorb environmental pressures. The purpose of abstraction restrictions is to retain more water in the system while conditions remain unusually low.

The economic consequences run in the opposite direction. Water left in a river cannot simultaneously be used to irrigate a crop.

Scotland's water-scarcity planning therefore operates as a controlled reduction in economic use when environmental conditions cross defined thresholds, with restrictions lifted when flows recover sufficiently.

Agriculture is particularly exposed because eastern Scotland combines relatively dry conditions with some of the country's most productive land and highest concentrations of irrigated vegetable crops.

Scottish Government advice now tells farmers and growers to plan explicitly for drought and possible abstraction restrictions, including through water storage, rainwater collection, alternative supplies, soil-moisture monitoring and more efficient irrigation.

That planning reflects a broader change in how water scarcity is being treated.

The Scottish Government's latest adaptation reporting records eastern Scotland experiencing its driest hydrological year since 1976 during 2025 after poor groundwater recharge and prolonged dry conditions. Government-supported research cited in its environmental research strategy points towards more frequent and longer hydrological droughts by the middle of the century, with climate change identified as the principal driver rather than increased abstraction demand.

The conditions of September 2026 cannot be reduced to a single national measure of drought. Large parts of Scotland are not at Significant Scarcity, and several catchments have improved sharply after rain.

The pattern is geographical and cumulative.

A river in the Borders can recover while one in Fife falls back below its low-flow threshold. Western rain does little for eastern groundwater. A wet weekend can interrupt a run of dry weather without restoring the stores beneath the soil.

That is the position now confronting the four east-coast scarcity areas.

Autumn has arrived. The abstraction restrictions have not yet gone with summer.

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ENVIRONMENT | 17 September 2026

Scotland Moves 35 Beavers to New Homes as 22 Are Killed Under Licence

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-moves-35-beavers-to-new-homes-as-22-are-killed-under-licence/>



Scotland is deliberately expanding its beaver population into new Highland catchments while continuing to remove animals from farmland and other conflict sites. NatureScot's latest figures record 84 beavers removed in a year, 35 released elsewhere in Scotland and 22 killed under licence.

Thirty-five beavers were moved into new parts of Scotland during the latest year of the country's reintroduction programme, extending the species farther into the Highlands while another 22 animals

were killed under licence where their presence was judged to be causing serious problems.

The figures are contained in NatureScot's Beaver Management Report for the 12 months from April 2025 to March 2026. They describe a species that is continuing to expand after centuries of absence from Scotland, but which is also now subject to an increasingly organised system of trapping, relocation, dam management and lethal control.

A total of 84 beavers were removed from 22 conflict sites during the year. Sixty-two were trapped rather than killed, representing almost three-quarters of all removals. NatureScot says most of the trapping took place on prime agricultural land where beaver activity had the potential to cause serious impacts.

Of the trapped animals, 35 were released into new or developing Scottish populations. Seven went to the Cairngorms National Park, 11 to Forestry and Land Scotland land at Glen Affric, two to Tay Forest Park and 15 to Abriachan Forest in the Beaulieu catchment.

A further 24 animals were transferred to licensed projects elsewhere in Britain.

The movement of the animals represents a significant change from the early years of formal beaver management in Scotland, when lethal control accounted for a much larger share of removals. NatureScot recorded 87 beavers killed under licence in 2021. The latest 12-month report records 22, almost unchanged from 23 in the preceding year.

The change follows a deliberate shift in government policy towards moving beavers rather than killing them where suitable alternatives are available.

Beavers have held European Protected Species status in Scotland since May 2019. Two years later, ministers announced that translocation would be used more actively to expand the population beyond areas it would be likely to reach through natural spread alone. Scotland's Beaver Strategy, published in 2022 and running to 2045, subsequently placed accommodation and mitigation ahead of translocation and lethal control in the hierarchy for dealing with conflict.

That policy has turned animals removed from one part of the country into the founding members of populations elsewhere.

The process is not simply a matter of catching an animal beside one river and releasing it beside another. NatureScot says trapped beavers are taken into a dedicated quarantine facility, examined by veterinary staff and screened for disease. Family groups are kept together where possible and captivity is intended to be as short as practicable.

The report says there were no deaths during trapping or transport during the year. One male kit died while in captive care following recovery from anaesthesia. A post-mortem did not establish a significant cause beyond congested or consolidated lungs. Two further kits remained in captive care at Five Sisters Zoo and had been paired together until they were old enough for release.

Health screening found no cases of *Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Salmonella* or *Yersinia* among the animals examined, although eight showed evidence of previous exposure to *Leptospira*.

Monitoring of released animals is also beginning to provide a clearer indication of whether translocation is working. NatureScot estimates one-year survival at about 86 per cent overall and 90 per cent for adults. It reports successful breeding, good body condition and continued establishment around release areas, while acknowledging that following individual animals over long periods remains difficult.

Natural mortality is also occurring. Monitoring has identified cases including apparent predation of beaver kits by otters.

The expansion is occurring against the background of a much larger population than existed when Scotland began formally experimenting with beaver restoration.

The first licensed Scottish Beaver Trial began at Knapdale in Argyll in 2009. By the winter of 2020-21, a survey of Tayside and surrounding catchments identified 251 active territories and produced an estimated population of about 954 animals, within a wide estimated range of 602 to 1,381.

At that point the number of territories had more than doubled from the 114 identified in 2017-18.

A new survey was completed during 2025 and is expected to be published this autumn. NatureScot says the results will confirm that the population is continuing to increase and expand its range, although not at the annual rate of about 30 per cent suggested by the previous survey.

That expanding population creates more opportunities for beavers to occupy suitable wetlands, rivers and woodland, but also increases the number of places where they meet farming, roads, drainage systems and other human infrastructure.

The latest report records 105 beaver dams being removed or modified under licence during the year. Sixteen flow devices were installed and two culverts were cleared. Five burrows were destroyed.

Those figures show another side of beaver restoration that is less visible than releases into Highland forests.

Beavers alter water systems. They build dams, raise local water levels, cut trees, excavate channels and create wetland. Those changes can provide habitat, slow water movement and alter river systems in ways valued by conservationists. The same activity can flood productive land, obstruct drainage or affect infrastructure when it occurs in the wrong place.

The national strategy was designed around that tension. Its long-term objective is not simply to increase

beaver numbers, but to establish populations in suitable catchments while maintaining systems for intervention where their activity causes unacceptable damage.

One family trapped during the latest reporting period illustrates how closely conservation and infrastructure can meet.

NatureScot extended trapping into April in connection with the A9 dualling programme because habitat within a beaver territory was due to be destroyed by ongoing works. The adult female had already been caught before the end of March, and trapping continued so the rest of the family group could be removed together.

The report does not present every intervention as a success.

NatureScot acknowledges weaknesses in the records returned by people authorised to carry out lethal control. Only four carcasses from licensed control were submitted for post-mortem examination. The regulator says some other animals could not safely be collected, while a number of shot beavers were not reported until licence returns were submitted later.

Information supplied about control operations was described as good in some cases but largely absent in others, including details such as locations, ages of animals and shot placement.

NatureScot says a planned Wildlife Management App should improve reporting by allowing controllers to record where and when animals are killed. The required development work has been delayed because developer time was prioritised for deer applications.

The regulator therefore remains dependent on existing return forms for information about some of the most consequential actions authorised under the management system.

Alongside the removals, interest in establishing beavers elsewhere is continuing to grow.

NatureScot invited expressions of interest from potential new catchments between October and November last year. Interest was recorded across 24 catchments, providing a pool of areas that can now be considered for future translocation proposals.

The Ness Beaver Project has separately carried out community consultation around the River Ness catchment and submitted an application for potential releases.

Scotland has therefore moved beyond the question that dominated the early reintroduction debate: whether beavers should be present at all.

They are already established, reproducing and spreading. The current task is increasingly one of deciding where that expanding population should be allowed or helped to establish, where its effects can be accommodated, and what should happen when the same animal that creates a wetland in one catchment floods productive ground in another.

During the latest year, Scotland's answer involved moving 35 beavers to new Scottish homes, sending another 24 to projects elsewhere in Britain, modifying or removing more than 100 dams and killing 22 animals under licence.

The population continued to grow through all of it.

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TRANSPORT | 17 September 2026

From LitterCam to Digital Warden: Inside the Company Behind Scotland's New Roadside AI Cameras

Read online: <https://modern.scot/from-littercam-to-digital-warden-inside-the-company-behind-scotlands-new-roadside-ai-cameras/>



The cameras newly watching traffic on two of Scotland's busiest roads are being presented as a six-month experiment in counting rubbish thrown from vehicles. The company behind them is an English enforcement-technology business whose systems can identify number plates, whose technology has already been tested with police in the Netherlands, and which this year filed to protect a new commercial name covering surveillance hardware, video analytics,

databases, artificial intelligence and security monitoring: Digital Warden.

A camera beside the Edinburgh City Bypass watches traffic moving through its field of view. Artificial intelligence analyses what it sees. Most of the imagery disappears. When the software believes something has been thrown from a vehicle, thirty seconds remain: fifteen before the event and fifteen after it.

The retained clip can contain the rear of the vehicle, its registration mark, the time and the general location. It is transferred to a UK-hosted cloud system and examined by a person.

Transport Scotland says the cameras now operating on the A720 and A1 are there for one purpose: research into roadside littering. The trial began on 14 September and will run until 31 March 2027. It is not an enforcement scheme. Vehicles will not be identified, no fines will result and the information produced will be aggregated and anonymised.

There is a substantial litter problem behind the experiment. BEAR Scotland says that in the previous twelve months it removed 3,018 bags of rubbish weighing more than 15 tonnes from the Edinburgh City Bypass alone.

The company supplying the technology, however, has built a business that reaches considerably further than counting rubbish.

LitterCam Limited is not Scottish. It was incorporated in England in 2019 and is based in West Yorkshire. The company describes itself as a provider of artificial-intelligence video analytics, environmental-crime deterrence and monitoring technology.

Its commercial system can do precisely what Transport Scotland says the Scottish deployment will not.

LitterCam advertises technology capable of detecting litter thrown from moving vehicles, identifying the vehicle type and registration, recording time- and location-verified video evidence and automatically flagging an incident for review and enforcement. Its current website describes an end-to-end service that can take an incident from detection and human validation through an automated request to the DVLA for

registered-keeper details, penalty processing, appeals and case resolution.

Enforcement was not an incidental feature added later.

In 2021, LitterCam co-founder and chief executive Andrew Kemp described the system through technology partner Axis Communications as an “enforcement and deterrent solution”. The technology combined Axis network cameras with edge-based analytics, device-control software and LitterCam's own platform. Once footage had been validated, Kemp said, the system could automatically request the registered keeper's details from the DVLA so that a penalty could be issued.

The company has since widened what it sells.

Its road-traffic product advertises artificial-intelligence detection of illegal parking, prohibited turns, no-entry violations and unsheeted loads. Cameras can be mounted on existing street furniture and the software can process events at the edge — on or close to the camera — without requiring every second of footage to be transmitted elsewhere.

Another product grades litter already lying on streets and roads. Artificial intelligence analyses images, combines them with geographical information and gives public authorities a mapped record of where waste accumulates and how conditions change.

The same technology can therefore observe an event, classify it, locate it, associate it with a vehicle, read a registration when configured to do so, create a record and move that information into a public-authority workflow.

LitterCam places that capability inside a much wider technological model.

It explicitly identifies Smart Cities as an area of its business.

The term appears on the company's current website beside AI Video Analytics and Edge & IoT. LitterCam says it supports public-sector organisations with smart-city initiatives and describes itself as working at the forefront of edge-based artificial intelligence.

That positioning goes back years.

When Kemp was asked in 2021 where LitterCam might go next, he said an automated and scalable system of this kind lent itself to becoming a “key part of the smart city of the future.”

He described cities becoming increasingly integrated through technology, with public departments working more closely, sharing data and pooling resources.

The statement came from LitterCam's own chief executive.

The British Government also placed the company within that developing industry. The Department for International Trade's UK Smart Cities Directory included LitterCam among British transport and mobility companies presented within the country's smart-city sector.

The directory described smart-city development through technologies including artificial intelligence and data, Internet of Things devices, intelligent transport, infrastructure, public safety, surveillance systems and data sharing. LitterCam appeared among companies working in connected infrastructure, autonomous vehicles, mobility systems and urban data.

A camera looking for a discarded wrapper can appear to have a narrow purpose. LitterCam's own commercial

positioning places the same underlying technology inside something much broader: connected public infrastructure in which cameras, sensors, artificial intelligence, databases and public authorities increasingly operate together.

Its industry relationships follow the same direction.

LitterCam identifies itself as an Axis Communications technology partner. Axis is an international network-video and surveillance-technology company whose integration programme is designed for businesses combining their own software and hardware with Axis products.

Axis describes modern network cameras not simply as recording devices but as sensors capable of generating data that software partners can analyse and integrate into other systems.

LitterCam also says it belongs to NVIDIA's Inception programme, an international ecosystem for artificial-intelligence companies providing technical development resources, training, partner networks, hardware and software support and access to a wider technology community.

Neither relationship establishes that every capability available through Axis or NVIDIA is being used in Scotland. They place LitterCam, a relatively small West Yorkshire company, inside much larger international networks concerned with artificial intelligence, edge computing, cameras and data.

It also operates inside Britain's intelligent-transport sector. LitterCam appears in the 2025 membership directory of Intelligent Transport Systems UK alongside businesses working in road-user charging, enforcement, IoT and 5G connectivity, cloud services, transport data and integrated infrastructure.

Kemp has repeatedly presented the company's technology to public-sector and industry audiences. He appeared before the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management in 2024 at a meeting that included an artificial-intelligence demonstration. In August 2025 he presented LitterCam to the Association for Public Service Excellence's Scottish Litter Managers Network alongside Keep Scotland Beautiful. In February this year he appeared again at APSE's national street-cleansing seminar.

These are the ordinary channels through which new public-sector technologies become familiar: conferences, professional networks, demonstrations, pilot schemes, local authorities and specialist industry groups.

LitterCam's reach has also extended outside Britain.

The company says pilots were commissioned by the Saudi Authority for Data and Artificial Intelligence and by Rijkswaterstaat, the Netherlands' national infrastructure authority. East Riding of Yorkshire Council subsequently referred independently to LitterCam's previous work in both the Netherlands and Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi project is less transparent. Modern Scot has located the company's statement and the later East Riding council account, but has not found a corresponding public Saudi procurement notice or SDAIA announcement setting out the project's location, scope, data arrangements or outcome. The claim that SDAIA commissioned the work therefore remains attributable to LitterCam rather than independently documented through Saudi public records.

The Netherlands leaves a clearer record.

There, LitterCam has worked with police.

The East Netherlands Police Environment Team publicly reported that it was investigating whether LitterCam software could help identify offenders involved in roadside littering and that trial recordings had

been made using the technology. LitterCam later described the same project as an attempt to determine whether its system could identify persistent litterers and provide evidence suitable for enforcement.

A separate Dutch project involving Rijkswaterstaat was presented by Kemp to Scottish local-government officials last year. LitterCam's presentation described a proof-of-value pilot achieving what the company said was a 95 per cent detection rate and said the work resulted in a recommendation to ministers that legislation should allow video footage to be used for enforcement.

The detection figure and description of the recommendation come from LitterCam's presentation rather than a published Rijkswaterstaat evaluation. The company's account nevertheless makes clear that the work was directed towards the use of automated video as enforcement evidence.

In England, that movement from detection to enforcement has already taken place.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council said its LitterCam installation automatically detected number plates before footage was reviewed by enforcement officers. At Loughborough, Charnwood Borough Council recorded 31 positive detections and issued 28 civil penalty notices.

Charnwood later discontinued its experiment. Council records said the technology had not proved an effective enough deterrent, had not reduced litter sufficiently and had not produced the expected reduction in clearance costs.

Transport Scotland has chosen a materially different arrangement.

Its privacy notice states that registration marks in Scotland may be captured incidentally.

LitterCam's commercial material states that its system can identify vehicle type and registration.

A system can possess a technical capability without that capability being activated or used in a particular deployment. Registration recognition may be disabled in Scotland. It may be suppressed during processing. The function may exist but be contractually prohibited from use.

The published privacy notice does not say which.

It says the cameras analyse traffic in real time; ordinary imagery is immediately deleted; suspected litter events produce a thirty-second clip; footage is reviewed by authorised personnel; LitterCam itself does not routinely access it unless explicitly authorised; and the trial will not be used to identify vehicles or individuals.

All retained imagery is to be deleted no later than seven days after the trial ends.

There is no evidence in the published material that Police Scotland receives a live or routine feed from these cameras.

That does not make recorded information legally inaccessible to police under every circumstance.

Information Commissioner's Office guidance says personal data can be disclosed to police and other law-enforcement bodies where disclosure is necessary, proportionate and supported by a lawful basis. An ordinary request does not automatically compel an organisation to provide information. A warrant, court order or other applicable legal requirement is different.

There is no evidence that Police Scotland has made such a request in relation to this trial.

What is established is that LitterCam has already tested its technology with a police environmental team

elsewhere in Europe, sells products designed for enforcement and has publicly described its place in smart cities where departments share data and pool resources.

Scotland is also changing the law around litter thrown from vehicles.

The Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024 created a civil-penalty mechanism allowing the keeper of a vehicle to be held responsible where litter is thrown from it. The system has not yet been brought fully into operation. The Scottish Government says regulations still have to be completed covering penalty levels, appeals and operating guidance.

Scotland is therefore testing a camera system in September 2026 whose commercial version reads registrations and supports enforcement while government is preparing the regulations required to implement a new keeper-liability regime.

Transport Scotland says the current experiment will not cross that line.

There is no evidence that it has.

The company supplying the technology has nevertheless spent years developing precisely the identification and enforcement capability that would be required if government later chose to use it.

Then there is the name.

LitterCam is almost disarmingly small.

The name contains its own explanation. Someone throws a wrapper through a car window. A camera sees it.

Litter.

Camera.

On 27 March 2026, LitterCam Limited filed UK trademark application UK00004363305 for another name: Digital Warden. The scope recorded by the UK Intellectual Property Office reaches far beyond litter detection. Under Class 9, the company sought protection for “video surveillance systems; surveillance hardware”. Class 35 covers data processing services in the field of video analytics. Class 38 covers transmission of digital video and data and access to databases for video analytics. Class 42 covers artificial-intelligence platforms supplied as software as a service. Class 45 covers security monitoring services. All five classes sit beneath the same applicant: LitterCam Limited. The filing therefore places the name Digital Warden directly over surveillance hardware, video analysis, data transmission, database access, artificial intelligence and security monitoring.

LitterCam Limited remains the company's legal name at Companies House. Digital Warden is a trademark filing, not a corporate name change.

The choice of words is nevertheless remarkable.

A warden is not exclusively a prison official. Britain has traffic wardens, park wardens and other officials responsible for supervising places and enforcing rules.

But prisons are one of the word's strongest modern associations. Cambridge gives the person in charge of a prison as the primary American-English meaning of warden. Oxford also records the person responsible for a prison among its principal uses. Across the word's meanings runs the same idea: supervision, custody, guardianship and the enforcement of rules.

LitterCam has not publicly explained why it chose Digital Warden.

The trademark filing gives the name its commercial setting: surveillance hardware, video analytics, databases, artificial intelligence and security monitoring.

A warden watches over a defined space and the people or activity within it. In a prison, that association is literal. Elsewhere, the word still carries the authority to supervise and enforce rules.

Placed beside networked cameras, artificial intelligence, video databases and remote monitoring, Digital Warden evokes a digital environment in which watching and rule enforcement are built into the infrastructure itself.

That does not establish that Scotland has become a digital prison.

But the association becomes harder to dismiss when set beside the company's own declared ambition to participate in smart cities built around integrated technology, shared data and pooled public resources.

Transport Scotland has drawn clear boundaries around the system operating on the A720 and A1 today: no vehicle identification, no fines, no enforcement, and deletion of retained imagery after the trial.

Those safeguards describe the present experiment.

They do not describe the full capability of the supplier's technology or the future market the company has been building towards.

For now, Scotland has been introduced to LitterCam.

The company has already filed another name.

Digital Warden.

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TRANSPORT | 17 September 2026

Waiting for the School Sea Bus: Ulva's Run to Mull

Read online: <https://modern.scot/waiting-for-the-school-sea-bus-ulvas-run-to-mull/>



For children living on Ulva, the journey into Scotland's education system begins with a boat. A new five-year council contract will keep that crossing operating as part of a transport network in which ferries, school buses and island timetables have to meet.

Argyll and Bute Council has awarded a £133,621 contract to continue carrying schoolchildren by vessel between Ulva and Mull, securing a small transport service that changes character when the visitor season ends and becomes part of the school network through the winter.

The contract was awarded to The Ulva Ferry, the existing local operator, following an open procurement exercise. Only one tender was submitted. The contract began on 17 August 2026, with price accounting for 75 per cent of the assessment and quality for 25 per cent. The stated value is £133,621 excluding VAT.

The money is not for the purchase of a ferry, nor does it represent the cost of running the whole Ulva passenger service. It is a contract for the provision of safe and secure school transport by vessel between the two islands.

Behind the procurement notice is a school journey determined by a narrow stretch of water.

The Ulva ferry is a small foot and bicycle passenger service operating between the Isle of Ulva and the settlement of Ulva Ferry on the west coast of Mull. During the main season it operates on demand. Argyll and Bute Council's study of transport associated with the proposed Mull education campus records a different pattern once winter arrives: during term time there is a school run for pupils living on Ulva twice each day.

For some children, stepping ashore on Mull is only one stage of the journey.

The council's transport study records a closed-door school bus operated from Torloisk to Tobermory, travelling through Ulva Ferry and Gruline. The service is deliberately timed to meet an Ulva ferry crossing, where what the report describes as "a small number of pupils" are collected.

The journey can therefore run from a home on Ulva, across the water by ferry, into a waiting school transport service on Mull and onwards towards Tobermory.

It is an unusually compact example of the interdependence built into transport across Scotland's island communities. A bus timetable cannot simply be designed around road mileage when some of its passengers first have to cross the sea.

The council study describes the wider school transport system on Mull, Iona and Ulva as a combination of public buses, closed-door school services, taxis and ferries. Some routes are timed around more than one

connecting service. The report found that, among 193 secondary-school-age pupils across Mull, Iona and Ulva in the 2024-25 academic year, about 4 per cent lived around Ulva and Ulva Ferry.

At the Ulva crossing, the scale is smaller still.

The current passenger ferry is run by local ferryman Rhuri Munro. Its published 2026 visitor timetable operates on demand between 9am and 5.30pm from Monday to Friday between the beginning of April and the end of October. Passengers do not need to make a conventional booking; they arrive at the crossing and use the service as required. The ferry takes people and bicycles rather than cars.

Sailings remain subject to weather and safe operating conditions, with the ferryman making the final decision on whether the crossing can proceed.

The winter school service sits outside that ordinary seasonal pattern. When much of the visitor traffic has gone, the transport requirement remains because children living on Ulva still have to reach school.

There is another geographical complication contained in the name of the local primary school.

Ulva Primary School is not on Ulva.

It stands on Mull, close to Ulva Ferry, immediately across the water from the island whose name it carries. Argyll and Bute Council describes the school as being situated close to the ferry, where there is a boat link to Ulva. The school's own current information gives a roll of eight pupils across P1 to P7 and says it shares a headteacher with Lochdonhead Primary School.

A child can therefore live on Ulva, cross from Ulva by boat and attend Ulva Primary without the school itself being on Ulva.

For older pupils travelling towards Tobermory, the journey extends farther into Mull's school transport system. The council study records the Torloisk service meeting the ferry before continuing to Tobermory 2-18 School, illustrating how a very small maritime link can become part of a much larger transport arrangement.

The existence of that arrangement reflects more than geography. The number of children living around Ulva and Ulva Ferry has long been connected with another practical question facing small communities: whether families can find somewhere to live.

Ulva Primary School came close to closure during a period of falling population. Mull and Iona Community Trust has recorded how a shortage of affordable housing was affecting the ability of young families to remain in the area. Housing development at Ulva Ferry subsequently became closely tied to attempts to support the school.

A second phase of the trust's housing programme brought four additional long-term rental homes into use in 2021, following two earlier affordable homes completed in 2017. The £1.3 million second phase was intended partly to meet housing need and partly to support the primary school roll.

At the time the new homes were completed, the trust said there would be 15 primary-age children at Ulva Ferry from August 2021, 11 of them living in trust-owned housing. Its subsequent annual accounts recorded the school roll reaching 16, the highest level in decades, with a second class teacher appointed.

Those numbers belong to that period rather than the present. The school now reports a roll of eight. Taken over time, however, the figures show how quickly the position of a very small rural school can change as

families arrive, children grow older and housing availability changes.

Across the water, Ulva has been undergoing its own attempt to rebuild a permanent population.

The island was brought into community ownership by the North West Mull Community Woodland Company in June 2018. Only five people were living there at the time of purchase. The community owner set out plans to increase the resident population, restore housing and develop a more broadly based year-round economy.

That work is continuing. In July this year the community company announced the completion of the first sale of a house plot on Ulva under community ownership, near Bracadale. The purchasers intend eventually to become full-time residents.

Permanent settlement on a small island depends on a collection of services that can appear minor when considered separately: housing, employment, access, transport and education. The school ferry is one of them.

The new council contract does not create that system. It pays to keep an existing part of it operating.

The procurement record does not state how many pupils are currently expected to use the service, their ages, which schools each attends or the precise morning and afternoon sailing times. The council transport study goes no further than recording a small number of pupils connecting from the ferry into onward transport.

Nor does the public contract establish a particular arrangement for days when weather prevents the crossing. The wider Mull transport study acknowledges the practical dependence of school journeys on connecting ferry and bus services, including occasions when disruption can prevent pupils reaching school.

The five-year award nevertheless puts a formal public contract around a journey that is easily missed in larger transport statistics.

On Ulva, the school run begins at the shore.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 17 September 2026

Five Thousand Tonnes, One Ship: Islay's £1.1m Road Plan Hits Dry Dock

Read online: <https://modern.scot/five-thousand-tonnes-one-ship-islays-1-1m-road-plan-hits-dry-dock/>



Argyll and Bute Council devised a new way of getting thousands of tonnes of road material to Islay after repeated ferry disruption affected resurfacing work. The method worked on Jura. Then the only suitable hire vessel went into dry dock.

Five thousand tonnes of planned road material, £1.1 million of work and as much as 44,000 square metres of resurfacing depended on one specialist ship.

Argyll and Bute Council had planned to move deferred-set macadam to Islay in five or six bulk shipments this year. The approach had already been used successfully on neighbouring Jura.

The larger Islay operation was due to follow, but the vessel required to carry and unload the material entered dry dock and its repairs overran. The council says the ship has an on-deck crane required at smaller piers and is the only vessel of its type currently available for hire.

Some critical work will still go ahead on the A847 in October using conventional hot bitumen transported to Islay by CalMac.

Changing the Logistics

The council developed the programme after larger Islay road projects had been under-delivered during the previous three years because of ferry reliability.

Conventional hot bitumen has a limited working period, requiring manufacture, transport and laying to be closely coordinated.

Deferred-set macadam can remain workable for more than 21 days, according to council papers, allowing large quantities to be produced in advance and shipped in bulk.

The strategic Islay and Jura allocation provided £750,000 for approximately 5,000 tonnes of material and another £350,000 for surfacing and laying.

Five or six deliveries were expected to provide enough material for around 20 full days of work, covering up to approximately 44,000 square metres of road.

Deferred-set material is not new. It was historically used to supply islands before hot-mix surfacing became more common.

Jura Went First

The council used deferred-set macadam on the A846 on Jura during the summer, and its roads programme

records the planned operation as completed.

The Islay problem arose with transport rather than the surfacing material itself.

The chosen vessel carries its own deck crane, which the council says is needed at smaller piers where equivalent shore-side lifting facilities are unavailable.

When its dry-dock repairs overran, no equivalent hire vessel was available.

The same ship is also used to carry winter road salt, although the council has not said that gritting supplies are at risk.

No replacement vessel has been publicly identified and no firm date has been announced for the full Islay operation. Council officers are expected to work with the ship owner on a revised programme.

The £1.1 million should not be treated as money lost. The work has been postponed rather than cancelled.

October Work Will Still Go Ahead

The council has selected a section of the A847 south of Port Mòr for resurfacing beginning on 5 October, subject to weather.

That work will use conventional hot bitumen brought to the island by CalMac.

The road is single track through parts of the affected area and the work will require lengthy daytime closures, with scheduled openings for local traffic, buses and school transport.

Traffic will also be able to travel through Port Charlotte, Kilchiaran and Portnahaven during the works.

The A847 runs through western Islay towards Bruichladdich, Port Charlotte and Portnahaven. It carries local traffic, buses and school transport alongside agricultural vehicles, timber haulage and other commercial movements.

Council records from separate works on the route have identified HGV traffic associated with forestry, farming, distillery operations and development.

The October work will address one section while the larger programme waits to be rescheduled.

A Changing Island Transport Network

The delay comes during wider changes to Islay's marine infrastructure.

Port Ellen closed in June for a major redevelopment and is expected to remain closed until 2029.

Mainland ferry services are operating through Port Askaig during that work, while Port Askaig has also undergone strengthening and repairs during 2026.

Those projects are separate from the dry-dock problem and did not cause the specialist vessel to become unavailable.

For now, the larger Islay resurfacing programme remains dependent on the return of the ship needed to unload its bulk material.

The council designed the scheme to reduce one transport constraint. Its timetable is now being determined by

another.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 17 September 2026

Scotland Has 219 Cladding Assessments Under Way: Only 16 Are Complete

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotland-has-219-cladding-assessments-under-way-only-16-are-complete/>



Scotland has 219 government-funded cladding safety assessments under way, up by 70 in three months. Sixteen have been completed, a total unchanged since September 2025, while 22 buildings have urgent interim safety measures in place.

At the end of March, 149 government-funded Single Building Assessments were under way. Three months later, that figure had risen to 219.

The completed total did not move.

Sixteen government-funded assessments had been completed by 30 June, the same number recorded nine months earlier. Another 29 reports had reached the Scottish Government but were still being checked against the programme's technical and assurance requirements.

All 16 completed assessments identified remediation work.

The programme is therefore handling a much larger number of buildings at the assessment stage than it was earlier this year, while the number that has completed that process remains unchanged.

Assessments Have Expanded Through Councils and Housing Providers

Most of the increase has come through organisations already responsible for large numbers of homes.

Registered Social Landlords were progressing 121 assessments at the end of June. Local authorities were progressing 97, compared with 31 at the end of March. One further assessment was being managed by a factor or property manager.

A Single Building Assessment examines the external wall system of a residential building and determines whether work is required to address risks to life.

The programme received 1,799 expressions of interest through its Single Open Call. Of those, 956 had been identified as likely to qualify for government-funded assessment, while 843 had been assessed as ineligible.

The larger assessment pipeline has not yet produced a similar increase in completed reports. Twenty-nine had been submitted to government but remained under review because they were incomplete or had not yet been confirmed as meeting the required specification.

Few Buildings Have Reached Permanent Remediation

Once an assessment identifies work, the building must still move through design, funding, responsibility and procurement before construction begins.

At 30 June, government-funded remediation reported through the programme had been completed on one building.

Additional work recommended for that property, for which homeowners were responsible, remained outstanding.

Government-funded remediation was under way on another two buildings. Developer-funded remediation had begun on two more.

The Scottish Government states that its quarterly management information does not capture every privately funded cladding repair or work carried out outside the programme.

The published figures therefore show the buildings moving through the national remediation system rather than every external-wall intervention taking place in Scotland.

Interim Safety Measures Have More Than Doubled

While permanent work remains limited, the number of buildings operating with temporary safety measures has increased.

Urgent Interim Measures were in place at 22 buildings at the end of June, compared with ten at the end of March.

The Scottish Government defines these as temporary measures required where an assessor identifies an immediate risk to human life that is considered unacceptable.

They can include waking watches, upgraded fire-alarm systems and changes to evacuation procedures.

Nine buildings whose assessments had been directly commissioned by the Scottish Government required such measures, and all nine had them in place. Another 13 buildings elsewhere in the programme were also operating with interim protections.

An assessment being under way does not itself establish that a building has a life-safety defect. The 22 buildings are those where temporary measures had already been identified as necessary.

The Estimated National Requirement Is Much Larger

The current programme sits within a much larger estimated pool of residential buildings.

Scottish Government modelling puts the number of residential buildings at least 11 metres high at around 13,400.

About 1,100 are estimated to be above 18 metres, while roughly 12,300 fall between 11 and 18 metres.

Within that stock, the government estimates that between 1,260 and 1,450 buildings might require work to address risks associated with external wall systems.

Those figures are estimates rather than a list of identified unsafe buildings. The modelling cannot determine which individual properties will require remediation.

Billions Could Be Required Over 15 Years

The expected financial scale grows with the number of buildings that may ultimately require work.

The Scottish Government has modelled potential public capital requirements of between £1.7 billion and £3.1 billion over a possible 15-year programme.

That is not an approved fixed budget. The range depends on assumptions about how many buildings require work, the extent of that work, future construction costs and the proportion paid by developers.

Recorded expenditure through the Cladding Remediation Programme stood at £21.6 million from 2021-22 to 30 June 2026.

A further £31.5 million was transferred to 13 local authorities earlier in 2026 for assessments and associated mitigation.

Edinburgh received £8.7 million, North Lanarkshire £7.7 million and Fife £3.6 million. Falkirk received £2.2 million, Aberdeen £1.8 million, South Lanarkshire £1.7 million, Highland £1.5 million and Dundee £1.4 million.

The shift of funding into councils has coincided with the increase in council-led assessments from 31 at the end of March to 97 at the end of June.

Developers Are Progressing Buildings at Different Rates

Developers also have a formal role in the remediation system.

Five companies had reported responsibility for 122 buildings under the Developer Remediation Contract by 30 June: Barratt Redrow, Bellway, Miller Homes, Persimmon and Taylor Wimpey.

The position varies markedly by company.

Barratt Redrow reported responsibility for 58 buildings, with no Single Building Assessments recorded as under way at the reporting date.

Taylor Wimpey reported 37 buildings, with six assessments under way.

Bellway reported 18 buildings, with 17 under way.

Persimmon reported five buildings, with four under way and one completed.

Miller Homes reported four buildings, with assessments under way on all four.

One developer-funded assessment had been completed and remediation had begun. Work had also started on another building while its assessment was still under way.

The published data does not explain why progress differs between developers.

The 2024 Act Created a Formal National Register

The Housing (Cladding Remediation) (Scotland) Act 2024 came into operation in January 2025.

It gave Scottish ministers powers to arrange Single Building Assessments and remediation, carry out urgent work and intervene where external wall systems create substantial risks to life.

The legislation also created the Cladding Assurance Register.

The register records whether a building has been assessed, whether remediation was identified and whether that work has been completed.

Seventeen buildings with completed assessments had been entered on the register by 30 June.

Public online access to the register is still being developed. Information can currently be requested in writing.

The Government's Targets Extend to 2029

The Scottish Government's Next Phase Plan, published in August 2025, said eligible expressions of interest should have assessment funding confirmed and an SBA instructed, urgent mitigation should be acted on immediately, and buildings where essential remediation had been identified should be placed on a pathway towards permanent work.

It also set an objective that by 2029 every high-risk residential building above 18 metres should be resolved, whether made safe, decommissioned or replaced.

Buildings between 11 and 18 metres were to have a defined route towards resolution.

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ENERGY | 17 September 2026

North Ronaldsay Faces Winter on Diesel as Power Cable Replacement Slips to Spring 2027

Read online: <https://modern.scot/north-ronaldsay-faces-winter-on-diesel-as-power-cable-replacement-slips-to-spring-2027/>



North Ronaldsay will spend the coming winter dependent on temporary diesel generation after replacement of its failed electricity cable to Sanday was delayed until spring 2027. Residents with small-scale renewable generation have also faced losses while the island operates under emergency network arrangements.

North Ronaldsay will remain on temporary diesel generation through winter after plans to replace its

failed subsea electricity cable this autumn were pushed back to spring 2027.

The cable linking the island to Sanday failed in February and was later found to be beyond repair. SSEN moved to a full replacement, requiring a new route, marine surveys, design work and environmental approvals before installation could begin.

That work has taken longer than first expected. Survey activity continued through the summer, while route design and consent requirements had to account for nesting birds, seal protections and other onshore and marine sensitivities. By September, the remaining installation window had narrowed too far for the work to be completed before winter.

SSEN says the replacement will now be installed at the earliest available opportunity in spring 2027.

Until then, the island's electricity supply will continue to depend on temporary generation. Fuel is being stockpiled ahead of winter because bad weather can interrupt ferry access and make deliveries more difficult.

North Ronaldsay is the most northerly of Orkney's inhabited islands, and the cable failure has exposed how much electricity security can depend on a single local connection. Temporary generation can keep homes and businesses supplied, but it also creates a new reliance on fuel deliveries, storage capacity and backup equipment through the most difficult part of the year.

The failure has also affected residents with their own renewable generation.

North Ronaldsay has a long history of small-scale wind power, including community-owned turbines and private household systems. Under the present emergency network arrangement, some local generators have been asked not to export electricity.

That has left some households facing financial losses, and SSEN is now establishing compensation arrangements for those affected.

The position is technically awkward but straightforward in principle: having turbines on the island does not mean those turbines can independently support the local network when the normal subsea connection is

unavailable. Generation, protection systems, voltage control and network balancing all have to work together.

North Ronaldsay has therefore spent months with renewable generation physically present on the island while diesel maintains the system.

The Replacement Cable Could Carry More Than Electricity

The new link also creates an opportunity to address another longstanding infrastructure weakness.

Modern subsea electricity cables can include fibre-optic capacity for network communications. In June, Orkney MSP Liam McArthur asked the Scottish Government to support use of that fibre for wider digital connectivity to North Ronaldsay.

He told Parliament that SSEN had indicated it was open to allowing access to fibre within the replacement cable if a telecommunications provider became involved.

The issue sits alongside a separate history of communications failures across Orkney's northern isles.

North Ronaldsay and neighbouring islands have experienced outages affecting broadband, mobile communications and digital services, while fibre deployment across the smaller islands remains uneven.

The failed electricity cable therefore intersects with a second infrastructure question: whether the replacement can provide both a stronger power connection and an additional digital route.

No telecommunications provider has yet been publicly confirmed for such an arrangement.

The opportunity nevertheless exists because the cable is being replaced rather than repaired.

Route Surveys Are Complete, but Installation Must Wait

The survey programme between Sanday and North Ronaldsay provides a visible record of how far the replacement project has progressed.

Marine notices show that remotely operated and crewed survey systems have been used to examine the cable corridor, collecting geophysical information from the seabed.

Operations were carried out during the summer and were completed in September.

That work will feed into the final design and installation planning.

Cable installation in exposed northern waters depends on vessel availability, sea conditions, regulatory approvals and a sufficiently reliable weather window. Once autumn conditions deteriorate, the probability of completing a marine installation without interruption falls sharply.

Waiting until spring extends the period of temporary generation, but it also avoids attempting a major subsea installation during the least predictable part of the year.

SSEN says the replacement will be installed at the earliest available opportunity in spring 2027.

A Wider Question of Island Resilience

The failed Sanday–North Ronaldsay connection is a small piece of Scotland's electricity system, but it sits inside a much larger programme of investment across Orkney.

SSEN's network planning documents describe growing electricity demand and generation across the islands and the need for substantial reinforcement extending towards 2050.

A new high-capacity transmission connection between Orkney and mainland Scotland is already under construction, while distribution networks across individual islands continue to depend on smaller subsea links.

Those two scales of infrastructure can exist at the same time.

An island group may be connected to major national energy projects while an individual community remains vulnerable to the failure of one local cable.

North Ronaldsay's experience also shows that resilience cannot be measured solely by installed renewable capacity.

The island has wind generation. It has community interest in battery storage and new renewable systems. What it currently lacks is its normal connection to the neighbouring island network.

Until that is restored, electricity security depends on temporary generators, stored fuel, ferry access and equipment intended as contingency infrastructure rather than permanent supply.

The replacement cable is now expected in spring 2027.

For North Ronaldsay, the coming winter will therefore be managed not by the permanent infrastructure beneath the sea, but by temporary generation on land and the fuel reserves assembled before the weather closes in.

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ENERGY | 17 September 2026

Shetland Expected £700,000 From Viking Wind Farm. It Now Expects £550,000

Read online: <https://modern.scot/shetland-expected-700000-from-viking-wind-farm-it-now-expects-550000/>



Shetland Islands Council has cut its forecast rental income from the 103-turbine Viking wind farm by £150,000. The adjustment provides an early measure of how money from the £580 million development is moving through council rent, community benefit, local taxation and the wider electricity system.

Shetland Islands Council expects to receive £550,000 from the Viking wind farm in 2026-27, £150,000 less than the £700,000 it included in this year's budget.

The revised figure emerged during a meeting of the council's Policy and Resources Committee on 14 September. The council owns the Busta Estate, where 18 of Viking's 103 turbines are located, and receives commercial ground rent under a long-term land agreement.

The rent contains a fixed annual element of about £177,000 and a further payment linked to wind-farm production.

The first operating figures emerged in 2024-25, when Viking was generating commercially for only part of the financial year. Council records subsequently showed £277,000 of production-related income for that period.

For 2025-26, the first full financial year after commercial generation began, the council initially estimated that the production-linked payment would be about £400,000. Added to the fixed rent of roughly £177,000, that produced an expected total of about £577,000. The amount ultimately received was approximately £550,000.

When the council prepared its 2026-27 budget, it increased the expected Viking rental income to £700,000. Finance officers have now revised that forecast back to £550,000, telling councillors that the higher budget figure had been set when limited information was available about the production-linked element of the agreement.

The £150,000 difference is therefore between the council's original 2026-27 budget assumption and its latest forecast. It is not money that had already been received and subsequently lost.

The rental income is separate from Viking's community-benefit payments. Part of the land arrangement is also understood to be shared with crofting tenants using the Busta Estate.

More Than £2 Million a Year Goes Through a Separate Community Fund

Viking's principal community-benefit agreement provides £2,214,500 a year to the Shetland Community Benefit Fund, with the amount index-linked over the operating life of the wind farm.

The agreement took effect when commercial generation began in September 2024. It followed a construction-period arrangement under which £400,000 a year was provided between 2020 and 2024.

The money is administered independently by the Shetland Community Benefit Fund and distributed to projects across the islands.

By April 2026, the fund said more than £2 million had been awarded to projects under its strategic priorities. Support has gone to community buildings, training, youth work, local development posts and household energy-efficiency measures. A further £225,000 was distributed through its community grant scheme during the 2025-26 fund year.

SSE Renewables describes the community-benefit commitment as being worth around £72 million over an assumed 25-year operating life when indexation is included.

Viking Has Also Changed Shetland's Rates Base

The project has produced another financial effect through non-domestic rates.

Scottish Government figures published this year show Shetland Islands Council retained £1,705,381 through the Non-Domestic Rates Incentivisation Scheme for 2024-25.

The government specifically identified the addition of Viking Energy Wind Farm LLP as the reason for the unusually large increase in Shetland's tax base. Viking was listed with a rateable value of £9.525 million.

The £9.525 million is the valuation used within the business-rates system rather than an annual payment to the council. The £1.705 million represents Shetland's retention under the Scottish Government scheme following growth in its non-domestic-rates base.

Viking itself is a 443MW development completed in September 2024 at a stated cost of £580 million. Its 103 turbines are connected to the wider British electricity system by the 600MW subsea transmission link between Shetland and Caithness.

SSE estimates that the wind farm can produce around 1.8 terawatt-hours of electricity in a typical year.

Nearly £28 Million Recorded in Constraint Payments

Renewable Energy Foundation data compiled from the electricity Balancing Mechanism records approximately £28.1 million in constraint payments associated with Viking since the wind farm entered operation.

Its figures show £9.329 million in 2024, £9.649 million during 2025 and £9.112 million during 2026 up to 10 September.

Constraint payments arise when the electricity network cannot safely move all the power being generated in one part of Britain to the places where it is required.

The National Energy System Operator can instruct generators to reduce output through the Balancing Mechanism. Generators may then receive payments associated with reducing production while generation is increased elsewhere on the system.

The presence of the 600MW Shetland transmission link does not mean that electricity leaving the islands can always continue through the wider Scottish and British network without restriction.

Large quantities of wind generation are concentrated in northern Scotland, while much of Britain's

electricity demand lies farther south. Transmission capacity between those areas can become constrained when generation is high.

There is no evidence in the material examined that Viking has breached the rules governing constraint payments. The figures record the consequences of operating substantial new generating capacity within a transmission network where reinforcement remains under construction.

Shetland Is Changing What It Expects From Future Energy Projects

Many of Viking's agreements were negotiated years before the turbines entered commercial service.

Since then, Shetland has developed a more formal approach to the economic return it expects from large energy developments.

In December 2024, Shetland Islands Council endorsed the A Fair Share for Shetland report produced by its Energy Transition Task Force.

The work examined community benefit, local and shared ownership, compensation, commercial returns and taxation. It also considered whether calculating community benefit primarily according to installed generating capacity adequately reflects the value of projects operating in places with unusually productive renewable resources.

Shetland's wind conditions allow turbines to generate particularly high volumes of electricity. The report examined how arrangements linked to actual production or revenue can produce a different local return from payments based primarily on installed capacity.

That work has since developed into the Shetland Development Charter, approved by councillors in July 2026.

The charter sets expectations for companies proposing major developments in the islands, including community benefit, local ownership opportunities, supply-chain participation, housing and wider economic contribution.

The first developer signed the charter on 1 September, with proposals including a local electricity discount, a minimum 5% community-ownership opportunity and measures intended to increase local participation in the project supply chain.

Viking predates that framework.

Its first full years of operation are now producing an operating record of the money associated with the development. For 2026-27, Shetland Islands Council currently expects £550,000 in commercial rent rather than the £700,000 entered in its budget. More than £2.2 million a year is flowing through the separate community-benefit agreement, while the project has also materially enlarged Shetland's non-domestic-rates base.

As further energy developments are proposed around Shetland, those figures provide a measurable record against which the islands' newer arrangements for community benefit, ownership and local economic return can be assessed.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 16 September 2026

NHS Scotland Awards New £100,000 Contract for Pelvic Mesh Removal

Read online: <https://modern.scot/nhs-scotland-awards-new-100000-contract-for-pelvic-mesh-removal/>



A new NHS Scotland contract will continue specialist pelvic mesh removal treatment for women living with complications from procedures that were halted in Scotland eight years ago. The £100,000 agreement maintains access to independent treatment alongside the national specialist service in Glasgow.

NHS Scotland has awarded a new £100,000 contract for specialist pelvic mesh removal services, continuing treatment for women affected by complications from implants used for stress urinary incontinence and pelvic

organ prolapse.

The contract award was published by Public Service Delivery Scotland on 15 September 2026. It covers clinically led assessment, treatment and mesh removal procedures for eligible NHS Scotland patients and was awarded to Spire Healthcare and Vaginal Surgery & Urogynecology LLC in St Louis, Missouri. The contract was concluded on 18 August and has a stated value of £100,000 excluding VAT.

The arrangement sits alongside Scotland's national Complex Mesh Surgical Service in Glasgow. National Services Scotland says most women who undergo surgery choose the Glasgow service, although patients can also be referred to independent providers in Bristol or St Louis after specialist assessment. For women using the independent route, the NHS pays for treatment as well as travel and accommodation, with arrangements also made for a companion.

The existence of a new contract in 2026 reflects the continuing consequences of a medical procedure that was once routinely used in Scotland but became the subject of sustained concern over serious complications, patient experience and the ability of the health service to recognise and treat women who had been harmed.

What pelvic mesh was designed to do

Transvaginal mesh was used principally in the treatment of stress urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.

Stress urinary incontinence can cause urine leakage when pressure is placed on the bladder through activities such as coughing, exercising or lifting. Pelvic organ prolapse occurs when weakened muscles and supporting tissue allow pelvic organs to move from their normal position.

Synthetic mesh was introduced as a means of reinforcing weakened tissue. In procedures for urinary incontinence, strips of polypropylene mesh could be used to support the urethra. Other forms of mesh were used in operations intended to repair pelvic organ prolapse.

For many women the surgery produced the intended result. Scotland's independent review of transvaginal

mesh later emphasised that serious complications did not occur in the majority of patients. But the review also concluded that mesh procedures carried risks which, for some women, were life-changing and could not always be corrected.

Concerns began to intensify as women reported chronic pain and other problems after surgery. The Scottish Government's review was established against growing concern over serious complications, poor understanding of why some had occurred and under-reporting of adverse events. The review also recorded that some women felt that their concerns had not been heard.

The complications associated with mesh could include pain, infection, exposure or erosion of the implant into surrounding tissue, urinary difficulties and further surgery. Mesh removal itself could also be technically difficult because implanted material could become incorporated into tissue.

By the time Scotland's final independent review was published in March 2017, the issue had developed beyond the safety of a single surgical technique. The review examined patient experiences, adverse-event reporting, clinical governance, consent, available NHS data and the treatment of women who developed complications.

It concluded that long-term evidence remained insufficient, that information systems needed improvement and that some women who experienced adverse events felt they had not been believed. The review said that this could add to their distress and delay remedial treatment. It called for better clinical awareness, stronger reporting, improved consent and clear pathways for women suffering complications.

For pelvic organ prolapse, the review found no evidence of additional benefit from routine use of transvaginal mesh compared with repair using the patient's own tissue and concluded that such procedures should not routinely be offered.

Scotland halted the procedures

In September 2018, the Scottish Government instructed health boards to stop the use of transvaginal mesh for both stress urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse.

The halt was introduced while a restricted-use system was considered, with ministers saying any future procedure would have to be confined to exceptional circumstances and subject to stricter approval and informed-consent requirements. Other forms of surgical mesh were treated separately and remained subject to their own clinical assessment.

The decision prevented continued routine use of the procedures at the centre of the controversy. It did not remove mesh that had already been implanted in women across Scotland.

For some patients, symptoms could be treated without further surgery. For others, partial or complete removal became an option, although removal is itself specialised surgery and does not automatically resolve every complication.

Scotland subsequently developed a national service specifically for women experiencing complex problems after mesh surgery.

The Complex Mesh Surgical Service in Glasgow, hosted by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, now provides multidisciplinary assessment involving specialist surgeons, doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and psychologists. Treatment can include non-surgical care or partial or full removal of mesh depending on the individual case.

Women are referred through local urogynaecology services and are assessed before treatment decisions are

made. The Glasgow centre forms part of a UK network of specialist mesh services.

The development of that pathway followed years in which some Scottish women sought treatment privately or travelled outside Scotland because they did not believe the available NHS options could provide the surgery they wanted.

In 2022, Scotland introduced a statutory reimbursement scheme for women who had paid privately for mesh removal before the new NHS-funded arrangements were established. The scheme allowed eligible patients to recover the cost of surgery and associated expenses. It subsequently closed to new applications in March 2024, but the NHS-funded referral pathway to independent providers remained in place.

Treatment now extends beyond Scotland

The current NHS pathway gives women who require surgery a choice between the national service in Glasgow and independent treatment elsewhere.

National Services Scotland says the two independent providers currently used are in Bristol and St Louis. Women choosing those providers have surgery and travel funded by the NHS, with accommodation organised for the patient and a companion.

The new procurement continues that arrangement.

Public Service Delivery Scotland says the contract is intended to provide specialist mesh-removal services according to clinical need. The contract was awarded under the procurement regime applying to health services, with clinical quality accounting for 80 per cent of the award criteria and price for 20 per cent.

The £100,000 contract does not establish how many women will require surgery during its term and should not be read as evidence that the number of women affected by mesh complications is either rising or falling.

What it does establish is that NHS Scotland still considers independent specialist provision necessary in 2026.

The treatment system is now markedly different from the one that existed when women first began reporting serious problems. Routine use of the transvaginal procedures at the centre of the controversy was halted. Scotland established a national specialist service, developed dedicated referral routes and created mechanisms for women to seek treatment outside Scotland at NHS expense.

The clinical legacy nevertheless remains.

Women who were implanted years ago can continue to experience complications and can still require specialist assessment or surgery. National Services Scotland's current guidance specifically provides for patients whose previous non-surgical treatment or earlier surgery has failed to resolve their problems.

Eight years after Scotland halted the procedures, the new contract published this week continues the system created to deal with their consequences.

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COMMUNITY | 16 September 2026

Highland Council Asked to Pause Health and Social Care Integration Review

Read online: <https://modern.scot/highland-council-asked-to-pause-health-and-social-care-integration-review/>



Highland Council is being asked to pause an 18-month review of how health and social care are governed after its own appraisal began moving towards an Integration Joint Board, while Scottish Government reforms may remove that model from Scotland's future system.

Highland councillors will be asked on Thursday to pause a review of health and social care arrangements that had already reached an advanced stage, after national

reforms announced this month created uncertainty over whether one of the council's two remaining options will continue to exist.

The Models of Integration Review has been examining whether Highland should retain its existing Lead Agency Model or move to an Integration Joint Board, the structure currently used across every other Scottish health and social care partnership.

A report going before the full council on 17 September says the detailed phase-two appraisal had produced emerging support for moving away from the existing arrangement towards an IJB. It now recommends stopping further work until the Scottish Government provides greater clarity about its plans for health and social care integration.

The council meeting begins at 9.35am in Inverness. Members are being asked to note the work already completed, continue direct discussions with the Scottish Government and return to the issue in December. Stakeholder engagement planned for October would still proceed.

The interruption comes after approximately 18 months of work by Highland Council and NHS Highland.

In March, councillors agreed that two models should proceed to the second stage of appraisal: continuation of the Lead Agency Model, with improvements, or adoption of a Body Corporate model governed through an Integration Joint Board.

Since then, officers from both organisations have carried out detailed appraisal sessions involving finance, governance, workforce, professional assurance and strategic and operational services. Additional programme staff were recruited in July, and the review now has a programme plan, risk register, issue log, action tracker and decision log.

The resulting appraisal had begun to point in one direction.

The council report says that although strengths and risks were identified under both systems, the "broad balance of opinion" among those involved in the appraisal favoured a move to an IJB. The Joint Steering Group considered the interim findings in August but concluded that further work was required before final recommendations could be made.

No decision to create an IJB has been taken. The assessment remained an interim stage in a process that had been expected to produce final recommendations to Highland Council and NHS Highland later this year.

A system unique in Scotland

Highland's present arrangement dates from 2012.

Under the Lead Agency Model, NHS Highland is responsible for adult health and social care, while Highland Council delivers integrated children's services, including children's social work and child health functions.

It is now the only Lead Agency arrangement remaining in Scotland. All other health and social care partnerships operate through Integration Joint Boards.

The arrangement brought services that had previously sat inside different organisations together under single lead bodies. The current review records benefits from that structure, including established integrated working, strong professional relationships and close collaboration within children's services.

It also identifies problems.

Participants in the review raised questions about accountability, financial planning, commissioning, professional governance, workforce arrangements, information sharing and the transition between children's and adult services. The appraisal considered whether an IJB could provide a clearer framework for planning and oversight across the whole health and social care system while retaining the integrated working already established in Highland.

The review was intended to examine organisational structures only insofar as they affected services. Its stated purpose was to determine whether the way care is planned, managed and overseen could better support people, families and communities across the Highland area.

That work was under way when the national position changed.

National reforms alter the options

The Scottish Government published its Programme for Government on 1 September, setting out a substantial restructuring of public services.

Among the proposals is the replacement of Scotland's 14 territorial NHS boards with two Strategic Health Boards. The government has also begun a three-month process with councils, unions, health and care providers and other organisations to determine future arrangements for social care and local government.

The final structure of social care has not yet been settled.

First Minister John Swinney said in his Programme for Government speech that current arrangements were overly complex and that he could not see the challenges in social care being resolved without a single line of decision-making, accountability and funding, "with the NHS taking the lead".

The government has simultaneously said the three-month engagement process will consider the future governance and delivery of social care and that discussions with local government will be used to reach a shared direction for reform.

Highland Council's assessment is that the implications for IJBs are therefore uncertain.

Its report says the information presently available suggests Integration Joint Boards may no longer be an

option for delivering integrated health and social care in Scotland. Officers are consequently recommending that Highland stops developing its own options until the national direction becomes clearer.

The Scottish Government has not announced the abolition of IJBs, and Highland's assessment should not be read as confirmation that they will disappear.

Review had reached substantive stage

The timing leaves Highland in an unusual position.

Its local review had moved beyond deciding whether change should be considered. Workshops and appraisal sessions had been completed across both organisations, additional programme resources had been recruited and the emerging assessment favoured an IJB over the existing Lead Agency structure.

The Joint Steering Group had initially expected final recommendations to reach Highland Council and the NHS Highland board during 2026.

The national reform programme could now change the framework within which that decision would be made.

Highland's report records that officers had already identified the Programme for Government as a risk to the review before ministers published their proposals. Once the national changes became known, officials concluded that continuing at the same pace could mean developing a structure that no longer fitted Scotland's emerging health and care system.

No quantified figure is given in the council papers for the total amount spent on the review to date. The papers record programme staffing and non-recurring investment associated with the work, but do not establish that expenditure has been wasted.

Care pressures remain regardless of structure

The governance review sits above continuing pressure on the services themselves.

Highland has faced persistent problems involving delayed hospital discharge, availability of care-at-home services, care-home capacity and recruitment across a large rural and island geography.

Council papers have previously recorded that care availability can directly affect how quickly medically fit patients leave hospital. A council report last year recorded 99 per cent occupancy across Highland care-home beds and more than 200 people affected by delayed discharge at that stage.

The Scottish Government's wider reform programme is also focused on reducing delayed discharge and moving more care into homes and communities. Its new Health and Care Improving Flow Plan requires health boards to improve discharge arrangements during 2026-27 and strengthen cooperation between hospitals, primary care, community services, social care and the third sector.

Highland Council says it has committed more than £30 million to social care over the past three years through its Operational Delivery and Transformation Plan while services have continued under the Lead Agency Model.

The future structure will therefore govern services already operating under financial, demographic and workforce pressure rather than create a new system from an empty base.

Highland seeks a place in the national discussion

Council leader Raymond Bremner and convener Bill Lobban wrote jointly to the First Minister on 8 September seeking an early meeting about the reforms.

The council report says their letter asks that Highland's circumstances be reflected in the development of the government's public-service changes and points to existing local arrangements that cross traditional organisational boundaries.

The existing arrangement also places services normally associated with the NHS inside Highland Council. These include health visiting and school nursing, with health visitors supporting families from pregnancy through the pre-school years. Highland Council has argued that the consequences for these locally integrated children's services need to be understood before the national structure is changed.

The council's response remains separate from the decision councillors face on Thursday. Members are not being asked to approve an alternative national structure. They are being asked whether Highland's own integration review should stop until the national position becomes clearer.

If they agree, the planned stakeholder engagement will continue, allowing the council to gather views both on local services and on the Scottish Government's emerging proposals.

A further report is scheduled for the December meeting of Highland Council. By then, the Scottish Government's three-month reform discussions should have progressed and further detail is expected on the future organisation of health and social care.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 17 September 2026

The Scottish Roots of the Sixth-Largest Trade Book Publisher in the United States

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-scottish-roots-of-the-sixth-largest-trade-book-publisher-in-the-united-states/>



When former chief executive Michael Hyatt wrote *The Thomas Nelson Way*, the company whose name he led was described as the sixth-largest trade book publisher in the United States. That name belonged to a Scotsman born on a small farm near Stirling in 1780 — a farmer's son who became a village teacher, nearly emigrated to the West Indies, struggled for work in London and eventually built one of Edinburgh's great publishing houses.

Long before Thomas Nelson became an American

publishing name, there was Thomas Neilson of Throsk.

He was born in 1780 in the low country east of Stirling, close to Bannockburn, into a family whose life combined farming, manual work and an unusually strong religious inheritance.

His father, William Neilson, worked a small farm and was also employed at times at a neighbouring brick and tile works. His mother was Liliias Gibson. The spelling of the family surname varied in surviving records — Nilson, Nielson, Neilson and Nelson all appear — long before Thomas eventually adopted the form by which the publishing company became known.

Religion was not peripheral to the household.

Thomas's grandmother had belonged to the congregation that followed Ebenezer Erskine out of the established Church of Scotland during the Secession of the 18th century. His parents were associated with the dissenting congregation known as the Craigs Kirk at Stirling, where his father served as a manager.

Thomas was baptised by the Rev. John McMillan, one of the ministers who helped shape the young man's religious outlook. A later history of the Craigs congregation records a tradition that Thomas may have been the first child baptised by McMillan, although the writer himself treated that as something he had been told rather than independently proved.

Thomas's formal education was modest even by the standards of rural Scotland at the end of the 18th century.

His first teacher was a woman named Mrs Abercrombie at Throsk, who apparently took him little farther than the alphabet. A second school taught reading and writing but not arithmetic.

One recollection preserved by the Rev. D. D. Ormond in 1897 describes a school so short of books that the teacher sometimes had Thomas practise reading one upside down simply to provide another exercise. At one point, according to the same account, the school was reduced to a single pupil.

Thomas was that pupil.

A third teacher, a Mr More, appears to have had considerably greater influence. Thomas progressed sufficiently that, at about 16, he became a teacher himself.

Teaching did not hold him for long.

Scotland in the 1790s was producing young men who looked overseas for opportunities unavailable at home, and Thomas considered joining them.

He made plans to emigrate to the West Indies.

A ship was waiting at Alloa. Thomas packed what little he had and set out for the port with his father.

The story of what happened on that journey survives through the religious history of his family and church.

His father asked whether Thomas had considered that, by emigrating, he would be placing himself far from the church life in which he had been raised. Thomas apparently had not.

He abandoned the voyage.

Father and son returned to Throsk.

The episode is revealing even if read with the caution appropriate to a family story recorded many decades later. Religion repeatedly influenced Nelson's decisions in ways that would eventually shape the books he chose to publish.

He next found work at a distillery at Craigend.

That job also ended.

Ormond records that Nelson disliked the work and objected to being required to work on the Sabbath. He then considered employment at a local pottery, although his father apparently discouraged that course.

For a young man who would eventually be associated with the newest technology of industrial printing, there is a curious glimpse of another technological revolution in his early life.

The 1897 account places him among those who accompanied engineer William Symington during experiments with a model steam vessel on the River Carron. It also records an acquaintance with Henry Bell, later associated with the pioneering paddle steamer Comet.

Those stories place the young Nelson near the beginnings of steam navigation at the same moment Britain was moving towards an industrial economy in which machines, transport and cheaper manufacturing would transform his own trade.

Eventually he left for London.

Success did not come immediately.

According to Ormond's account, Thomas struggled to find employment and paid what he owed his landlady until he was reduced to a single coin. He gave that coin to a beggar.

Penniless, he began asking men he encountered whether they knew of work for a young man.

The search took him into the London book trade around Paternoster Row, the narrow street beside St Paul's

Cathedral which had become one of the centres of British bookselling and publishing.

There he found the occupation that fitted him.

Books had already interested him, particularly religious books. Work with a London publisher exposed him to the commercial machinery through which manuscripts became printed objects and printed objects became a business.

He also formed friendships that reached beyond the print shop. One early acquaintance identified in the 19th-century account was Thomas Kelly, another man in the book trade who later became an alderman and Lord Mayor of London.

Nelson did not leave his Scottish religious world behind.

He joined other Covenanters in London in maintaining a prayer meeting. Church records cited by Ormond show that in 1804 a request associated with Nelson was made for a minister to visit the London group. The Rev. John Reid was subsequently sent south for several Sabbaths in 1805.

That documentary trace is useful because the chronology of Nelson's earliest business years is not entirely consistent across surviving histories.

The standard company history dates his Edinburgh second-hand bookshop to 1798, after his first period in London. The 1897 Craigs history, drawing on church records, places him actively involved with the London congregation several years later and describes him taking a publishing agency to Edinburgh in 1808.

The exact sequence is therefore less tidy than later company histories sometimes suggest.

What is secure is that, by the early 19th century, Thomas Neilson had established himself in Edinburgh's book trade and that the West Bow became the place from which his business grew.

The little shop stood at the head of one of the Old Town's most distinctive streets.

Later sources give different street numbers as Edinburgh's numbering changed, but contemporary descriptions place the business in the timber-fronted buildings where the West Bow climbed towards the Lawnmarket.

It began with second-hand books.

University students became customers.

One recollection preserved by Ormond says students trusted Nelson because the price he put on a book was regarded as the fair price. The description accords with a wider reputation for personal rectitude that followed him through later accounts of his life.

The bookseller soon became a publisher.

His first instincts reflected the beliefs of the Throsk farmhouse and Craigs congregation.

Nelson issued religious works in inexpensive instalments, allowing readers to buy a substantial work gradually instead of finding the price of a completed volume all at once.

Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress was among the works associated with the early business. John Howie's Scots Worthies, with its accounts of Scottish Covenanters and martyrs, fitted Nelson's own religious inheritance particularly closely.

The list widened.

William Robertson's history of Scotland, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Robert Burns, Goldsmith and Defoe appeared in inexpensive Nelson editions as the firm moved from devotional literature towards a much broader programme of established works.

The method was as important as the titles.

Nelson recognised that the potential market for literature extended beyond people accustomed to purchasing expensive books. Skilled workers, families, students and young readers represented a much larger public if printing costs and retail prices could be brought down sufficiently.

That apparently simple calculation became the foundation of the business.

It also created opposition.

According to both the later company tradition and 19th-century accounts, some booksellers resisted Nelson's cheap editions. He responded by going around the established distribution channels, selling books at fairs and through auctions in Scottish towns.

In 1829 the company began using a travelling representative to visit booksellers through southern Scotland and northern England.

A practice that had initially unsettled parts of the trade became ordinary publishing business.

Somewhere in this period, Neilson became Nelson.

The conventional company explanation is that customers repeatedly misspelled his surname.

Ormond preserved a more colourful version.

While working in London, the young Neilson had put savings into the Bank of England. When he later attempted to withdraw money, the account had apparently been entered under the spelling Nelson while he signed the cheque Neilson.

The bank would not accept it.

The historical account says he adopted the bank's spelling and later joked that, like the naval hero Horatio Nelson, he had lost an "i" in the service of his country.

Whatever the precise trigger, by 1818 the business name had become Thomas Nelson.

His private life was also taking shape.

On 15 March 1814 he married Margaret Sibbald Black, a woman from Kinghorn in Fife approximately 16 years younger than he was.

They had seven children — four sons and three daughters.

William, born in 1816, would eventually join the publishing business and become a major force in its commercial expansion.

John entered the ministry and became the Rev. Dr John Nelson of Greenock.

Thomas, born on Christmas Day 1822, followed his father and brother into publishing and became the

technical and manufacturing mind of the second generation.

James became a doctor.

Their daughters included Anne, Margaret and Jessie.

The family eventually extended far beyond Scottish publishing. Anne Nelson married George Brown, the Edinburgh-born newspaper proprietor and politician who became one of the leading figures in the creation of the Canadian Confederation. They were married at the Nelson family home, Abden House, in November 1862, the year after Thomas Nelson's death.

Before the family reached Abden House, Thomas lived much closer to his work.

Ormond records him first residing in Trotter's Close, near the West Bow business, and later at Gordon House.

As the company prospered, the geography of his life moved southwards with Edinburgh's expansion.

Abden House was built for him in 1855 on what is now part of the University of Edinburgh's Pollock Halls estate. The three-storey Jacobean revival house, designed by Thomas Davies, still survives.

The farmhouse boy from Throsk had become wealthy enough to commission a substantial Edinburgh residence.

His religion remained constant through that change in circumstances.

Nelson's name appears on the roll of an Edinburgh Reformed Presbyterian congregation by 1809. He was chosen as an elder in 1811.

He served in several church roles over the decades, including as treasurer, precentor and representative elder.

The same religious convictions that helped determine his early choice of books remained part of his life after the company had expanded into secular literature.

They were not merely a public identity attached to a publishing list.

Historical accounts of Nelson repeatedly describe prayer and church service as fixtures of his private life. One story tells of a visiting minister who had to leave without praying during a call at Nelson's home. On his next visit, Nelson reportedly made certain that prayer came first.

His business was becoming a family concern at the same time.

William joined the firm in 1835 at 19.

Thomas junior followed in 1839 at 17.

The division of abilities between the brothers proved important. William concentrated strongly on sales and commercial expansion. Thomas gravitated towards production, editorial work and machinery.

Their father had established the principle of inexpensive books; his sons developed the industrial system capable of producing them on a much greater scale.

The firm moved through larger premises at Castle Hill and in the mid-1840s into a purpose-built works at Hope Park.

There nearly every stage of book production could eventually be performed on one site: printing, stereotyping, engraving, lithography, binding, woodcutting, warehousing and even the dyeing of cloth used for bindings.

The workforce reached hundreds.

The younger Thomas Nelson contributed directly to printing technology, developing an improved rotary press using curved stereotype plates. His work belongs to the wider transformation from flat-bed printing towards fast rotary production that made high-volume publishing increasingly economical.

A London branch opened in Paternoster Row in 1844 — returning the Nelson name to the same London publishing district associated with the founder's early working life.

New York followed in 1854.

The Edinburgh bookseller's business had crossed the Atlantic.

By then Thomas senior was no longer the active force he had once been.

The University of Edinburgh's corporate history dates his formal retirement to 1852.

His withdrawal was not simply a consequence of age.

For approximately the last quarter-century of his life, Nelson suffered recurrent ill health. Ormond's account says there was a significant period of improvement between roughly 1843 and 1850, but otherwise illness increasingly limited him.

That means much of the spectacular expansion commonly associated with "Thomas Nelson" was in fact achieved jointly across generations.

The founder created the business model and reputation.

William and Thomas built the international and industrial publisher upon it.

In 1858 the company formally became Thomas Nelson and Sons.

Three years later, the founder was dying.

Thomas Nelson spent his final years at Abden House.

His son John later wrote an account of his father's last days for the Christian Treasury, and portions of that family recollection were incorporated into Ormond's church history.

When Nelson was told that death was approaching, the account says he accepted the news calmly, picked up his New Testament and said that he must finish his chapter.

He died at Abden House on 23 March 1861.

He was 81.

Margaret survived him for more than 16 years, dying in December 1877.

They were buried in Edinburgh's Grange Cemetery, where the Nelson graves became a family cluster.

The arrangement of the monuments still records the household that grew around the publisher.

Nearby are the graves or memorials of William; Thomas junior and his wife Jessie Kemp; the minister John; James; Margaret; Jessie; and later members of the family.

Thomas Nelson had begun life on a small Stirlingshire farm and ended it at an Edinburgh house built from the proceeds of an international publishing concern.

The company continued without him.

In April 1878, 17 years after his death, fire destroyed the Hope Park works.

The catastrophe belongs to the second generation, although it was later absorbed into the mythology of the founder's company.

The buildings, machinery and stock were devastated. Stereotype plates kept in protected storage survived, and Edinburgh offered temporary accommodation while rival printers provided access to machinery.

Within months, Nelson was producing books again.

The company moved to the enormous Parkside works below Arthur's Seat.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Thomas Nelson & Sons was one of the great international names of Scottish publishing.

Its cheap classics, educational books, children's literature and religious publishing travelled through an international network that ultimately included London, New York, Toronto, Paris, Leipzig and markets throughout the British Empire.

Its relationship with John Buchan added another Scottish literary connection. Buchan worked as literary adviser and business partner as well as publishing his own books with the firm.

The University of Edinburgh now holds more than 4,700 letters associated with Buchan's work for Nelson, within an archive extending to dozens of boxes, hundreds of letter books and thousands of pieces of business correspondence.

The family itself also entered public life far beyond publishing.

William Nelson became known for expenditure on the restoration of historic Edinburgh buildings and monuments.

Anne's husband George Brown became a Canadian statesman and Father of Confederation.

Thomas junior became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and supported scientific, educational and charitable causes.

The publishing dynasty had travelled far from the one-room schools and small farm of Throsk.

The 20th century eventually broke the direct continuity.

War took family members and disrupted markets. Thomas Arthur Nelson, a grandson of the founder, was killed at Arras in 1917 while serving during the First World War.

The structure of international publishing was changing too.

In 1962 the British business became part of the Thomson organisation. The Edinburgh manufacturing

operation was later separated and the Scottish printing works closed in 1968.

The American business followed another path.

That chapter was later told by Michael Hyatt, who eventually became Thomas Nelson's chief executive.

Hyatt's *The Thomas Neilson Way* traced the company's history from the Edinburgh founder through to Sam Moore, the Lebanese-American entrepreneur who had built Royal Publishers around Bible selling and publishing in the United States.

In 1969, Royal acquired the American Thomas Nelson operation and adopted its name.

Under Moore, the American company expanded dramatically in Christian books and Bibles.

Hyatt eventually succeeded him.

It was during this period that Hyatt described Thomas Nelson as the largest Christian publisher in the world and the sixth-largest trade book publisher in the United States.

The description in the headline belongs to that period.

Thomas Nelson is not today an independent company holding that position.

HarperCollins announced its acquisition of Thomas Nelson in 2011 and completed the \$200 million purchase in 2012. The business subsequently became part of HarperCollins Christian Publishing alongside Zondervan.

The Thomas Nelson imprint remains active in 2026, publishing books and Bibles from the United States.

Its Bible division describes the company as one of the oldest and largest Bible publishers in the world.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 17 September 2026

The Little Wooden Boxes Scotland Sent Around the World

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-little-wooden-boxes-scotland-sent-around-the-world/>



They held powdered tobacco, sewing needles, spectacles, pills, perfume, photographs and reels of thread. They carried pictures of Burns Cottage, Scottish castles and seaside resorts, but also scenes from France, America, Australia and South Africa. Behind these little wooden souvenirs was an Ayrshire industry employing hundreds of people, exporting across the world and providing early work for artists who would later enter the highest ranks of Scottish art.

Some of the objects are scarcely larger than a

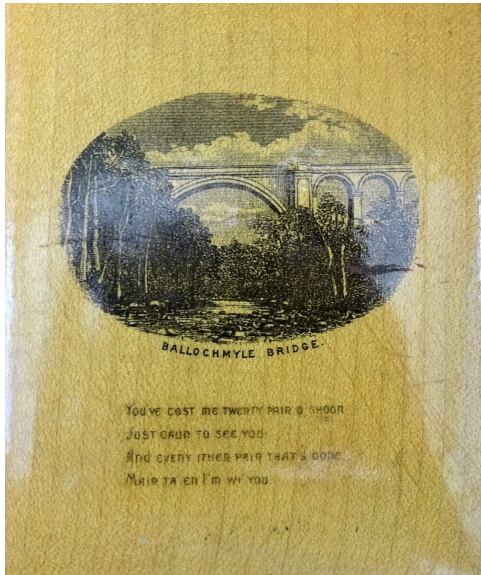
matchbox. Others are round, barrel-shaped or made to resemble miniature books. There are needle cases and money boxes, spectacle cases, photograph albums, card cases, perfume containers, egg cups, napkin rings, thread boxes, sewing boxes and small wooden covers for books. Many are made from pale sycamore polished until the surface almost glows. Across their lids appear Robert Burns, Alloway Kirk, the Brig o' Doon, castles, cathedrals, harbours, hotels, railway destinations and landscapes from places thousands of miles from the Scottish town where the objects were made. They are known collectively as Mauchline ware.



Before the railway souvenir, the Burns keepsake and the tiny tartan-covered sewing box, there was snuff. Snuff was finely ground tobacco. Instead of being smoked, a small pinch was taken and inhaled through the nose. By the late 18th century it was a common social habit among men and women and across social classes. The powder needed to remain dry and fresh, creating a practical need for a small box with a closely fitting lid.

Snuff boxes became everyday possessions. Expensive

examples could be made from gold, silver or tortoiseshell, while horn, papier-mâché and wood provided less costly alternatives. Producing a good wooden box presented its own engineering problem: the lid had to close tightly enough to protect what was inside.



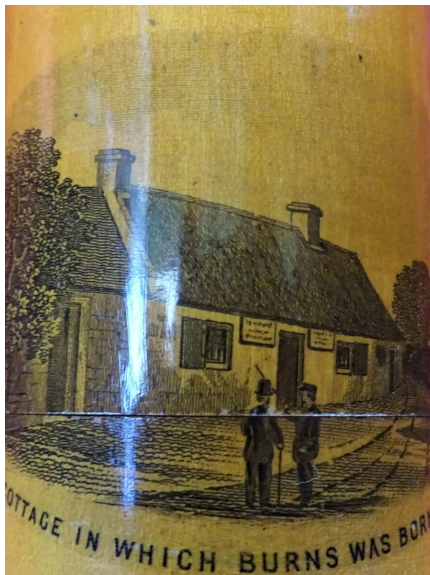
One of the technologies that eventually fed the Mauchline industry began far from Mauchline itself. Future Museum's history credits James Sandy of Alyth in Perthshire, described as a bedridden mechanical inventor, with perfecting an ingenious integral wooden hinge in which the hinge formed part of the wooden construction rather than being attached separately in metal.

A joiner named Charles Stiven developed the idea commercially at Laurencekirk in Kincardineshire from about 1783. Behind him stood an unusual early investor, Lord Gardenstone, a judge of the Court of Session with an interest in commerce. Gardenstone saw that the boxes could become more than practical tobacco containers and brought in Vincent Brixhe, an artist familiar with the decorated lacquer boxes produced at Spa in Belgium. Scottish boxes began carrying painted landscapes, portraits, hunting scenes and places of

historical interest. Among the customers were Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, and Charles Stiven and Sons received a Royal Warrant in 1849.

The technology might have remained concentrated in eastern Scotland had somebody not broken a box at a country house in Ayrshire.

In 1807, Sir Alexander Boswell — poet, antiquarian and son of James Boswell, the biographer of Samuel Johnson — was entertaining guests at Auchinleck House when one of them damaged the wooden hinge of a Laurencekirk snuff box. The broken box was taken to a local gunsmith named Wylie, where an employee, identified in the surviving museum history only as Crawford, repaired it. In doing so, he worked out how the secret wooden hinge had been made.



Crawford subsequently established his own wooden snuff-box business at Cumnock. An accidental repair had become an episode of informal industrial espionage.

Other makers followed. By the 1820s, more than 60 box makers were working in Scotland, according to Future Museum, with around 50 concentrated in Ayrshire communities including Auchinleck, Cumnock, New Cumnock, Ochiltree, Catrine and Mauchline. Mauchline eventually became so dominant that its name came to identify the wider class of Scottish souvenir woodware, although the technology that supported it had developed through Alyth, Laurencekirk, Cumnock and elsewhere.

The town's great commercial name was W. & A. Smith. The firm began with wooden hinged snuff boxes but expanded as consumer habits changed. As snuff taking declined, the manufacturers converted the

same woodworking skills into almost every small domestic object that might plausibly be carried, displayed or given as a present.

W. & A. Smith opened a Birmingham warehouse and showroom in 1829. It received a Royal Warrant from William IV in 1832 and later won a gold medal at the Great Exhibition of 1851 for higher-end decorated snuff boxes.

The development that transformed the trade, however, was the ability to place pictures onto wooden objects cheaply and repeatedly. Instead of requiring an artist to paint each landscape by hand, an engraved image could be printed and transferred onto a prepared wooden surface. Finishing and successive coats of varnish protected the design, allowing a single view to appear on hundreds or thousands of souvenirs.

The technique matured as Victorian Britain became increasingly mobile. Railways shortened journeys and opened resorts, historic towns, literary landscapes and coastal destinations to a far larger travelling public. Tourism was becoming a mass commercial activity rather than the preserve of those with the money and time required for lengthy journeys by coach.

The new travellers bought things, and a Mauchline box fitted the market neatly. It was inexpensive enough to be attainable, decorative enough to serve as a present and useful enough to remain in the household long after the journey had ended. A spectacle case could carry Burns Cottage, a thread box the Burns Monument and a money box Alloway Kirk. The same Scottish manufacturers supplied English cathedrals, European landmarks and overseas scenery. An object made in Ayrshire could depict somewhere on the other side of the world.

W. & A. Smith produced views of France and Belgium and then places in North and South America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Hundreds of thousands of pieces travelled through Britain and overseas during the industry's long life. For a period, a small Ayrshire town was manufacturing the objects through which tourists remembered places far beyond Scotland.

The artistry behind them also connects Mauchline ware to the formal history of Scottish painting. Several men who decorated Scottish snuff boxes before establishing major artistic careers later became significant figures in 19th-century art.

Horatio McCulloch briefly worked as a snuff-box decorator before becoming one of Scotland's leading landscape painters. His large Highland scenes helped establish the visual language through which generations encountered the romantic Scottish landscape. Daniel Macnee also decorated the lids of sycamore snuff boxes in Ayrshire before becoming a successful portrait painter, president of the Royal Scottish Academy and, in 1877, a knight.

William Leighton Leitch spent two years at Mauchline painting snuff boxes after the Glasgow theatre where he had worked as a scene painter failed. He later became one of Britain's prominent watercolour teachers and served as drawing master to Queen Victoria and the royal family for 22 years. Before the academy presidencies, royal lessons and great landscapes came the little wooden boxes.

Not everything painted on them was genteel. Descriptions of surviving ware include Burns scenes, landscapes, portraits, classical figures and hunting pictures, but also risqué cartoons. The market extended from respectable domestic display into the less formal humour of the period.

Robert Burns nevertheless became one of its most valuable subjects. The connection was geographical as well as commercial. Mauchline stood within Burns country. The poet had lived at nearby Mossgiel Farm, while Burns Cottage, Alloway Kirk, the Brig o' Doon and other places associated with his life were becoming destinations for literary pilgrims.

The manufacturers supplied them with objects in extraordinary variety. Burns's portrait appeared on boxes. Burns Cottage appeared on spectacle cases and money boxes. Alloway Kirk, the Brig o' Doon, the Burns Monument, Tam o' Shanter and scenes from the growing Burns mythology were reproduced across polished pieces of Scottish wood.

Eventually the picture itself was no longer enough. The trade increasingly sold provenance alongside imagery.

Objects were marketed as having been made from timber associated with the places they depicted, transforming historical and geographical association into part of the commodity itself.

Surviving pieces carry claims that their wood grew beside the River Doon. Around Stirling, souvenirs were advertised as being made from trees grown on the Field of Bannockburn, on Abbey Craig or on the slopes of Stirling Castle. The souvenir could therefore be presented not merely as a representation of a place but as a physical fragment supposedly taken from it.

One surviving object takes that appetite for relics to an extraordinary extreme. Future Museum holds a tiny oak pill box measuring only 13 millimetres high and little more than three centimetres across. Inside it is a paper inscription claiming that the wood was cut by Jean Armour Burns from the bedstead in which her husband Robert Burns died. The note identifies the Mauchline maker and records the purchaser, while a related snuff box in the same museum network survives with silver plaques declaring that it was made from part of the bed on which Burns died.

The provenance claims survive with the objects and cannot necessarily be independently proved after so much time. Their existence nonetheless records a market in which association with a famous dead writer could turn ordinary timber into a saleable relic.

At Stirling Castle, fire created another opportunity. On 18 November 1855, fire damaged the Douglas Room, historically associated with the killing of the eighth Earl of Douglas by James II in 1452. Timber said to have been recovered during the restoration was subsequently turned into souvenirs.

One survives in the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum. It is a photograph album with space for 48 cartes de visite, the small photographic calling-card portraits fashionable during the Victorian period. Its covers carry a hand-painted view of Stirling Castle and a declaration that they were made from wood saved from the Douglas Room fire. The album was sold inside the restored Douglas Room itself. The building supplied the material, the historical association supplied the story and the restored room supplied the market. Damaged architecture had become retail heritage.

The industry was equally adept at converting Scottish identity into design. Tartan ware became one of its most recognisable forms. Printed tartan patterns were applied to wooden objects with sufficient precision to create a large range of named designs. This was industrial manufacture rather than an unchanged survival of Highland craft: printed paper, machinery, varnish, commercial naming and Victorian enthusiasm for tartan combined to make clan imagery portable.

The same happened with natural history. From around 1870, W. & A. Smith became a major producer of fern ware. Real ferns were commonly laid onto wooden surfaces as stencils before contrasting finishes were applied. The fashion coincided with the Victorian enthusiasm for collecting and studying ferns, turning botanical specimens into repeatable decorative motifs.

Photography was absorbed as well. Archibald Brown's Caledonian Box Works at New Lanark specialised in applying photographs to wooden ware alongside transfer-printed products, while the Mauchline firms adapted to the same changing visual market.

Advertising followed. Thread manufacturers including Coats and Clark commissioned wooden boxes containing reels of cotton. Advertising could appear inside the lid or on the base while the exterior retained its scenic or decorative finish. A single object could combine Scottish woodwork, Burns imagery and the expanding textile economy.

Behind the polished surfaces was industrial labour. Future Museum records that Davidson, Wilson and

Amphlet employed about 300 people. Around 200 were boys working from home, applying as many as 36 coats of varnish over several days. The finish preserved on surviving objects therefore concealed a labour-intensive production system extending beyond the factory walls into domestic work undertaken by children and young workers whose names largely disappeared from the historical record.

W. & A. Smith grew larger still. At its peak it employed more than 400 people, and Future Museum describes it as the largest employer in Ayrshire at the time.

Mauchline ware was an industrial product despite its later classification as decorative art. Timber had to be acquired and seasoned. Wood had to be turned, cut and fitted. Images had to be engraved and printed. Transfers required careful application. Surfaces were repeatedly finished and varnished. The completed goods then had to be catalogued, packed, transported and distributed through shops, hotels, monuments and tourist destinations across Britain and abroad. The small souvenir rested on a substantial manufacturing and distribution system.

Its decline came gradually. Glass, ceramics and other mass-produced goods widened the tourist market. German manufacturers produced competing imitation wares at lower prices. Snuff had already lost its earlier dominance, while fashions in household decoration continued to change.

The Ayrshire firms consolidated. W. & A. Smith took over Wilson and Amphlet in 1884. Davidsons ceased trading in 1889. The New Lanark box works eventually closed in 1906. Smith survived by adapting again, selling undecorated wooden objects for poker-work and handicraft classes, including supplies sent to Harrods and other London retailers. Children's wheelbarrows and small furniture also entered the catalogue.

Then fire intervened. The Mauchline works were damaged by fire in 1933. W. & A. Smith finally closed in 1939 as Europe entered another war. The old works had been known locally as the Boxworks; the site is now occupied by Mauchline fire station.

The objects themselves dispersed much more widely and now survive in museums, private collections and auction rooms around the world. Their preservation has also depended on collectors such as Betty Meikle of Stirling, a pharmacist who was appointed OBE and assembled an extensive collection of Stirling-related Mauchline ware. When she died in 2013, she left 109 pieces to the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, including the photograph album made from timber associated with the Douglas Room.

These objects now document far more than a decorative-arts industry. They record the expansion of mass tourism, the commercialisation of Burns, Victorian enthusiasm for relics, the rise of tartan as an internationally saleable Scottish image, the early working lives of important Scottish artists, domestic and child labour, advances in transfer printing and the ability of manufacturers in a small Ayrshire town to supply customers across several continents.

They also record a Victorian desire to turn travel into possession. A landscape, literary association or historic building could be reduced to a portable object and carried home — perhaps as a picture of a cottage, a tartan box, or a piece of wood said to have grown beside the Doon, survived a castle fire or once formed part of the bed in which Robert Burns died.

Mauchline developed a commercial language for memory before the modern souvenir industry had acquired its present form, sending small Scottish-made objects into homes around the world.

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Future Museum — Fern Ware. Development from about 1870 and use of real ferns in the decorative process.

<https://www.futuremuseum.co.uk/collections/arts-crafts/decorative-arts/box-ware/fern-ware>

Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum — Mauchline Ware. Stirling tourist trade; souvenirs made from wood said to have grown at Bannockburn, Abbey Craig and Stirling Castle; development of tartan printing; Betty Meikle OBE collection. <https://www.smithmuseum.scot/mauchline-ware/>

Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum — A Rare Stirling Gift, Mauchlineware Souvenir. Photograph album made from wood said to have been saved from the Douglas Room at Stirling Castle after the fire of 18 November 1855; 48 cartes de visite; provenance and Betty Meikle bequest.

<https://www.smithmuseum.scot/a-rare-stirling-gift-mauchlineware-souvenir/>

National Trust for Scotland — Mauchline Ware Threadbox. Burns Monument and Burns Cottage imagery on a thread box made from wood described as having grown on the banks of the Doon.

<https://www.nts.org.uk/collections/object/object-57678>

National Trust for Scotland — Flat-edged Mauchline Ware Spectacle Case. Burns Cottage souvenir inscribed as having been bought at Burns Cottage. <https://www.nts.org.uk/collections/object/object-51605>

National Trust for Scotland — Mauchline Ware Box Depicting Burns House & Nanse Tannock's Mauchline. <https://www.nts.org.uk/collections/object/object-118856>

Royal Scottish Academy — Horatio McCulloch RSA. Career of the Scottish landscape painter after his early decorative work. <https://www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1622-horatio-mcculloch-rsa/overview/>

National Galleries of Scotland — Horatio McCulloch, 1805–1867. Early employment decorating snuff boxes before his landscape career. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/29685>

Royal Scottish Academy — Sir Daniel Macnee RSA. Career of the portrait painter who worked in the Ayrshire snuff-box trade before becoming president of the Royal Scottish Academy.

<https://www.royalscottishacademy.org/artists/1618-sir-daniel-macnee-rsa/overview/>

Dictionary of National Biography — William Leighton Leitch. Records his period painting snuff boxes at Mauchline before his later career as a watercolourist and teacher.

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dictionary_of_National_Biography%2C_1885-1900/Leitch%2C_William_Leighton

Royal Collection Trust — William Leighton Leitch. Leitch's later career as Queen Victoria's watercolour tutor.

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/exhibitions/victoria-and-albert-our-lives-in-watercolour/the-queens-gallery-palace-of/exhibition-features>

TEA WITH GUNNS | 17 September 2026

Three Hours Without My Phone Nearly Brought Down the Household

Read online: <https://modern.scot/three-hours-without-my-phone-nearly-brought-down-the-household/>



At six o'clock on Tuesday evening I put my mobile phone in the kitchen drawer. Mr Gunn put his in beside it. He did this without hesitation, which should have warned me that we were not approaching the evening from equal positions. The drawer already contained batteries, takeaway menus, elastic bands, a screwdriver for repairing glasses, and several keys whose purpose is now archaeological. I placed the phones on top and closed it.

"That's it," I said.

Mr Gunn looked at the drawer.

"For how long?"

"Three hours."

He looked at the clock.

"Why?"

I had read that restaurants were beginning to discourage mobile phones at the table. Some ask customers to put them away, some provide little boxes, and somewhere in Italy, apparently, a restaurant will give you wine if you surrender yours. This had struck me as civilised. I have reached the age at which anything described as a return to "proper conversation" sounds reassuring, provided nobody actually expects me to organise one.

So I had decided that Mr Gunn and I could surely manage from six until nine without consulting a screen. Not a weekend, not a retreat, and not one of those digital detoxes involving a cabin, nettle tea and a woman called Freya explaining that my nervous system has forgotten how to breathe. Three hours seemed proportionate.

Mr Gunn shrugged.

"What happens if somebody phones?"

"They cannot."

"Why?"

"Because the phones are in the drawer."

"That doesn't stop them phoning."

"No. It stops us answering."

This appeared to satisfy him. Peace descended for approximately forty seconds.

I had put potatoes in the oven and could not remember how long they had been there. Normally I would ask my phone. I looked at the clock, then at the oven, then at Mr Gunn.

“How long have the potatoes been in?”

“Twenty minutes, maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“They’re potatoes.”

This was not the level of precision I required. I opened the drawer, checked the timer and discovered there were 23 minutes remaining. I set the oven timer. The phone went back, and I wrote ONE on the back of an envelope. Then, after consideration, I added MR GUNN: 0 underneath it.

He noticed.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

I had barely sat down when I remembered the washing was outside. The sky had been grey all afternoon, although in the Highlands this is less a forecast than a default setting. Normally I would check the rain radar. I did not. Instead, I looked out of the window, which felt old-fashioned and wholesome until I realised I could see approximately 50 yards in one direction and no weather whatsoever approaching from the west, which is where all Scottish weather keeps its weapons.

“Do you think it’s going to rain?”

Mr Gunn looked outside.

“Yes.”

“When?”

He looked again.

“Later.”

There are people who can live comfortably with this level of meteorological uncertainty. I am not one of them. The phone came out. Rain in twelve minutes. Interruption two. The washing came in. Mr Gunn remained on zero.

The oven beeped, which was encouraging because it meant at least one appliance in the house could still perform its function without contacting a start up company in California. I began making dinner and discovered that the recipe required 200 millilitres of stock. I could not find the measuring jug. Normally I would ask the phone how many tablespoons were in 200 millilitres, but instead I stared at the drawer.

I decided to estimate. People had apparently managed soup for centuries before smartphones.

Mr Gunn wandered through.

“What are you doing?”

“Working out 200 millilitres without technology.”

He picked up a mug.

“That’s about 200.”

I looked at the mug.

“How do you know?”

“It says 250 on the bottom.”

I turned it over. It did. This was irritating. I used the mug, then checked on my phone to make sure.

“That one definitely shouldn’t count.”

Mr Gunn raised one eyebrow.

“Interruption three. It counts.”

“I was only verifying.”

“I gave you the answer.” He put a mark on the envelope.

“Go away.”

"Still zero."

He returned to the sitting room.

At 6.34pm there was a thump outside. This house has wildlife cameras because previous experience has established that if something crashes, digs, steals, overturns or dismembers anything after dark, it is usually interesting. I looked through the window and saw nothing. The phone was in the drawer. The camera app was on the phone. I lasted nearly a minute before retrieving it.

It was a pine marten. Interruption four. The pine marten appeared to be carrying something, but the image was unclear, so I enlarged it. Interruption four became four-and-a-half, which I decided not to count because Mr Gunn didn't insist.

“What’s it got?” Mr Gunn asked.

“I thought you weren’t interested in phones.”

“I’m interested in the pine marten.”

Dinner was served. I had now retrieved my phone four times in 42 minutes. Mr Gunn had retrieved his no times. This was not detoxification. It was interval training with a witness.

We ate without phones, and for several minutes nothing happened. The table was quiet. There was food. There was no news. Nobody knew what strangers were angry about. I had no idea whether anything had happened in Westminster, Hollywood, Inverness or a supermarket car park in Dundee. It was extremely pleasant.

Then Mr Gunn said, “Did David Bowie ever play Aberdeen?”

I stopped. This was not a request. It was simply a thought released into the room. Ten years ago it would have

remained unresolved. Twenty years ago someone might have remembered eventually. Thirty years ago we would have argued until one of us went to bed. Now there was a phone six feet away containing the answer.

I resisted. I concentrated on my potato. The question remained on the table between us. Had Bowie played Aberdeen? Possibly. Maybe. Surely. Mr Gunn had already moved on. I had not. The uncertainty began to itch.

“You’re doing that deliberately.”

“Doing what?”

“Not caring.”

“About Bowie?”

“About not knowing.”

He shrugged.

“We’ll survive.”

This sort of attitude has held civilisation back for centuries. I opened the drawer. Interruption five. owie had played in Aberdeen. I will not say when because that is how this starts.

I had 5 on the envelope. Underneath it, MR GUNN: 0. He ate another potato.

At 7.03pm the television refused to open the programme we had planned to watch because the streaming service required me to sign in again. The password was stored on my phone. Interruption six. The streaming service then sent a verification code to my phone. Interruption seven. Having successfully proved to the television that I was myself, I was permitted to watch something I already pay for.

Mr Gunn watched the entire procedure from the sofa.

“In the old days,” he said, “you pressed a button and the television came on.”

“In the old days there were three channels.”

“Yes.”

“And one of them was farming.”

“Still worked.”

The programme began. Three minutes later the dog started barking at the front door. There was nobody there, so I checked the doorbell camera. Interruption eight. A moth had flown past it. The dog regarded this as a successful interception. Mr Gunn congratulated him. Neither required a phone.

At 7.22pm I remembered I had promised to order cat food. I decided it could wait until morning, then remembered why I had promised to order it that evening: we were nearly out. The cats were asleep and therefore unaware that the household supply chain was approaching collapse. I considered leaving the matter until morning, then pictured the cats without food.

Interruption nine.

The pet-food website required my bank to confirm the payment. The bank sent a notification. Interruption ten. The notification asked me to approve the purchase in the banking app. Interruption eleven. The banking app

wanted Face ID, which I found personally insulting after everything we had already been through.

Mr Gunn appeared in the doorway.

“What are you doing now?”

“Cat food.”

He nodded and went away.

Cat food secured, I put the phone back. The envelope had acquired tally marks down one side and the appearance of evidence. Mr Gunn’s section remained offensively clean: MR GUNN: 0.

The heating began to feel cold. Our thermostat can technically be adjusted manually. I know this because there is a small box on the wall which presumably contains buttons. I have never touched them and I'm not sure if I should. The heating app was on my phone, and I found myself looking towards the drawer.

Mr Gunn looked towards me.

“No.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You’re thinking about the heating.”

“How do you know?”

“You’ve been staring at the thermostat for five minutes.”

“Are you cold?”

“No.”

This was because he was wearing a jumper thick enough to shelter livestock. I put on a cardigan. This was a breakthrough.

For perhaps twenty minutes the digital detox held. Then the lights in the sitting room dimmed. Not romantically. They simply went dim. The bulbs are controlled by an app. I could have stood up and used the switch, but the switch turns all four lights off and then, for reasons known only to the manufacturer, brings them back at full brightness resembling an interrogation room.

I sat in the gloom. Mr Gunn continued reading.

“Can you see?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“My book light, see?”

Of course he had a book light. Civilisation had apparently continued quietly beside me while I was installing apps.

I could no longer see my book.

At 8.11pm my watch vibrated. I had forgotten about the watch. This was awkward. Apparently I had spent the entire phone-free evening wearing a smaller phone strapped to my body.

Mr Gunn looked at it.

“That seems like cheating.”

“I forgot I had it on.”

“It’s glowing.”

“I know.”

“It just spoke.”

“I know.”

I took it off. It immediately informed me that removing it would affect my activity tracking. I placed it beside the envelope.

Mr Gunn looked at his score. Still zero.

“You seem to be enjoying this.”

“I’m reading.”

“You’ve not once wanted your phone?”

“No.”

“Not even to check anything?”

“What would I check?”

I genuinely could not answer. There are people like this living among us.

At 8.26pm there was another noise outside. I did not check the wildlife camera. I remained seated. There was a second noise. I remained seated. There was a third noise of sufficient size and confidence to suggest either the pine marten had returned with colleagues or part of the house had detached.

Mr Gunn turned a page.

“Aren’t you going to look?”

“No.”

Another crash.

He looked towards the window.

“That sounded expensive.”

I checked. Interruption thirteen. A deer was eating the roses. There are moments when digital restraint must yield to household emergency.

I went outside and the deer left. When I came back in, I could not find my phone. This was new. For most of

the evening I had been attempting not to use it. I now needed it specifically so I could put it away.

I checked the kitchen, the table, the chair, my coat, the bathroom and the windowsill. Eventually I stood in the sitting room.

“I need your phone.”

Mr Gunn lowered his book.

“What for?”

“To find mine.”

“That feels circular.”

“Give it to me.”

He retrieved his phone from the drawer for the first time all evening. I immediately wrote MR GUNN: 1 on the envelope.

“That doesn’t count.”

“You touched it.”

“You asked me to.”

“The phone-free rules contain no spousal exemption.”

“I’m not accepting that.”

He rang mine. It sounded from inside the cupboard where I had put it down while retrieving a torch. Finding my own phone brought my total to fourteen, so I updated the evidence.

MRS GUNN: 14. MR GUNN: 1.

Mr Gunn disputed the second figure. I underlined it.

It was 8.48pm. Twelve minutes remained. I sat down and, for the first time all evening, nothing happened. Mr Gunn read while I sat with my hands folded.

For eight full minutes I possessed no information beyond what was available in the room. It was unexpectedly peaceful.

At 8.56pm, with four minutes remaining, something began screaming inside the kitchen drawer. Not ringing. Not chiming. Screaming. Mr Gunn looked up. I froze. The noise continued with one of those alarm tones designed for people who sleep through earthquakes.

“That’s yours,” I said.

“No.”

“It is absolutely yours.”

The drawer continued to howl.

Mr Gunn went into the kitchen and opened it. His phone was flashing. I followed him.

Across the screen were the words:

TEST SMOKE ALARMS

I looked at him. He looked at the phone.

“You have an alarm to remind you to test the alarms?”

“Yes.”

“At eight fifty-six at night?”

“Monthly.”

“Why eight fifty-six?”

“I must have set it at eight fifty-six.”

The alarm continued.

“Turn it off.”

“I am.”

He pressed something. Nothing happened. He pressed something else. The torch came on. The alarm continued.

I stood beside him enjoying this more than was decent.

“Would you like me to Google how to stop it?”

“No.”

He eventually silenced it. I picked up the envelope and amended the score.

MRS GUNN: 14. MR GUNN: 2.

“Absolutely not,” he said.

“You have now used your phone twice.”

“The first time was because of you.”

“Still a phone.”

“And this was an alarm.”

“Also on a phone.”

“I didn’t seek information.”

“You illuminated the kitchen with it.”

“That was accidental.”

I drew a box around the 2.

At 8.58pm, the score was therefore fourteen to two.

Mr Gunn considered himself undefeated.

He picked up the small folding steps from beside the pantry.

“What are you doing?”

“Testing the smoke alarms.”

“Now?”

“That’s what the reminder is for.”

And off he went.

At nine o’clock the experiment was over.

Mr Gunn maintained that his true score was zero.

I opened the drawer properly. There were seventeen notifications, three emails, two news alerts, a weather warning, four messages, a reminder that I had spent less time on my phone than usual and a notification from the screen-time app congratulating me on reducing my screen use.

From upstairs came a piercing electronic shriek, followed by another.

Then Mr Gunn shouted, perfectly satisfied:

“They’re working.”

My mobile phone, I discovered, is no longer merely a telephone. It is my timer, map, torch, camera, bank, television key, weather station, recipe book, doorbell, thermostat, wildlife ranger, shopping list, password vault and emergency research department for unresolved David Bowie questions. Mr Gunn, apparently, needs none of these things. He needs a newspaper, a lamp and one monthly reminder.

I had not removed a distraction. I had put most of the house in a drawer.

Modern Scot - Distinctly Scottish

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