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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 23 September 2026

Labour Joins SNP and Greens as Holyrood Votes 84–18 for Scotland’s ‘Right to Decide’

Read online: <https://modern.scot/labour-joins-snp-and-greens-as-holyrood-votes-84-18-for-scotland-right-to-decide/>



Scottish Labour joined the SNP and Greens to back the principle that Scotland has the right to determine its own future, producing an 84–18 majority at Holyrood. The vote does not authorise another independence referendum, but it creates a much broader parliamentary majority around the question of who should ultimately decide Scotland’s constitutional future.

Scotland’s constitutional argument shifted at Holyrood

on Tuesday, although not in the way a vote on independence itself would have done.

MSPs were not asked whether Scotland should leave the United Kingdom. They were not asked to authorise another referendum, and the Scottish Parliament was not being given the legal power to hold one.

They were asked something more fundamental: whether Scotland is a nation with the right to decide its own future.

Eighty-four MSPs voted in favour. Eighteen voted against.

The size of the majority came from an unusual alignment. Scottish Labour joined the SNP and Scottish Greens in supporting the final motion despite continuing to oppose independence and another referendum under present circumstances. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats opposed it. Reform UK’s MSPs walked out before the final vote.

That makes Tuesday’s division different from the familiar parliamentary split between supporters and opponents of independence.

The SNP and Greens already hold a pro-independence majority at Holyrood. Together they have 73 of the Parliament’s 129 seats following the May election. Labour’s support pushed the proposition considerably beyond that bloc.

The original motion lodged by First Minister John Swinney was only one sentence long:

“That the Parliament agrees that Scotland is a nation that has a right to decide its own future.”

It contained no proposed referendum date, no instruction to begin separation negotiations and no declaration that Scotland should become independent.

That narrow wording left room for parties which disagree profoundly about independence to consider a different question: whether the choice itself ultimately belongs to Scotland.

Swinney told Parliament that supporters and opponents of independence could disagree about where Scotland

should end up while accepting the right of its people to decide. He argued that the existing constitutional arrangements offer Scotland no guaranteed mechanism through which voters can trigger another referendum, regardless of how future Scottish elections are fought or decided.

The point goes directly to the unresolved constitutional question left after the 2014 referendum and the Supreme Court judgment eight years later.

Scotland voted by 55.3 per cent to 44.7 per cent to remain in the United Kingdom in September 2014. That referendum took place because the UK and Scottish governments agreed beforehand to create the legal route for it. A Section 30 order temporarily altered the limits of Holyrood's powers, allowing the Scottish Parliament to legislate for the vote.

No permanent mechanism was created for deciding when, or under what circumstances, another referendum could be held.

That absence became decisive in 2022.

The UK Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the Scottish Parliament could not legislate unilaterally for an independence referendum because a bill providing for such a vote would relate to matters reserved to Westminster, including the Union and the UK Parliament.

The judgment settled the legal question under the existing Scotland Act arrangements. It did not settle the political question of what would have to happen before Westminster should agree to another vote.

Tuesday's debate returned directly to that gap.

Labour's position made the vote particularly notable.

New Scottish Labour leader Michael Marra had already said that he believed Scotland had the right to decide its future. He also said that Scotland exercised that right in 2014 and argued that supporters of constitutional change would have to establish a sufficiently strong and settled public demand before another referendum should take place.

In the chamber, Labour did not endorse the SNP's argument for an immediate route to another vote. Marra instead challenged the Government over its priorities and used Labour's amendment to place child poverty, employment, education, housing and stronger communities alongside the constitutional proposition.

The amendment committed Parliament to treating child poverty as an immediate national priority and reaffirmed the statutory target of reducing relative child poverty to fewer than one child in ten by 2030.

Parliament accepted it.

That produced an unusual final position: Labour voted for a motion declaring Scotland's right to decide while simultaneously arguing that the circumstances for another referendum have not been established.

The distinction is central to understanding the 84–18 vote.

It was not an 84-vote majority for independence.

It was not an 84-vote majority for holding a referendum immediately.

It was an 84-vote majority for the proposition that Scotland possesses the right to determine its constitutional future.

The Greens successfully added another element. Their amendment stated that the May 2026 Scottish Parliament election had returned the largest ever majority of pro-independence MSPs.

The arithmetic supports the parliamentary claim.

The SNP won 58 seats and the Greens 15, creating a combined pro-independence bloc of 73 MSPs. The equivalent total after the 2021 election was 72.

That result is politically important, but it also requires careful interpretation.

Before the May election, the SNP had placed particular weight on winning an outright parliamentary majority itself. Swinney argued that an SNP majority would provide a mandate based on the precedent of the 2011 election, after which the UK Government agreed to the process that led to the 2014 referendum.

The SNP won 58 seats in May, seven short of the 65 required for an outright majority.

It also lost six seats compared with 2021.

The Greens, however, increased their representation sharply, from eight MSPs after the previous election to 15. The result therefore produced the largest combined parliamentary bloc for parties supporting independence even as the SNP failed to secure the majority it had identified as its own electoral test.

Opposition parties have focused heavily on that difference.

The Liberal Democrats' amendment recalled the 2014 referendum and the SNP's failure to win an overall majority in May. It argued that the Government should instead concentrate on the NHS and social care, the cost of living, roads and ferries, education and transferring greater power to communities.

The Conservatives took a similar position on the authority of the 2014 vote.

Scottish Conservative leader Russell Findlay's amendment sought to replace the Government's central wording with a statement that Scotland had already voted decisively to remain within the United Kingdom and that government should concentrate on taxation, economic growth and public services.

Reform UK went further by challenging the debate itself.

Scottish Reform leader Malcolm Offord raised a point of order arguing that it was inappropriate for Holyrood to spend time debating a reserved constitutional matter.

Presiding Officer Kenneth Gibson rejected that argument, noting that parliaments are free to debate matters whether or not they possess legislative competence over them.

Offord subsequently withdrew his amendment and led Reform's MSPs from the chamber. He described the debate as a farce and an insult to voters, arguing that Parliament should be dealing instead with subjects including homelessness, public finances and drug deaths.

The walkout meant Reform's 17 MSPs did not participate in the final 84–18 division.

The disagreement over whether another referendum should take place also sits against a changing argument at Westminster.

When Prime Minister Andy Burnham met Swinney in Glasgow in July, Downing Street said Burnham had stated that another independence referendum was "off limits", arguing that government attention should remain on economic growth and household living costs.

His language became less absolute during Prime Minister's Questions on 9 September.

Asked by SNP MP Chris Law why Northern Ireland has a statutory route towards a border poll while Scotland has no equivalent mechanism, Burnham referred to the requirement for sufficient public support before a Northern Ireland referendum would be considered and said he regarded Scotland as being in the same situation.

He then added that he was not aware of majority public support for another Scottish referendum and said there would not be one until that changed.

Downing Street subsequently maintained that the Government's underlying position had not changed and repeated that another referendum remained off limits under present circumstances.

Swinney seized on the Prime Minister's Commons remarks and wrote to him the following day, asking for talks on turning the principle into a defined legal mechanism.

That exchange exposes another difference at the centre of the debate.

Northern Ireland has a statutory constitutional route written into law. Scotland does not.

The Scottish Government argues that if Scotland is part of a voluntary union, there must ultimately be a practical means by which the electorate can choose to reconsider membership of it.

Opponents of another referendum argue that the 2014 decision should continue to carry authority unless a sufficiently clear change in public opinion can be demonstrated, and that repeated parliamentary motions do not themselves establish such a change.

The question is complicated further by the difference between parliamentary representation and public opinion.

The May election produced 73 MSPs from the SNP and Greens, both of which support independence. That is a clear parliamentary majority.

It does not by itself establish that a majority of Scottish voters currently support independence or another referendum at a particular time. Holyrood's electoral system combines constituency and regional voting, and seats are not a direct percentage translation of national votes cast.

The same caution applies to Tuesday's 84 votes.

The result establishes what the Scottish Parliament decided. It does not convert that parliamentary division into a referendum result, nor into evidence that 84 out of every 102 Scottish voters would take the same position.

What it does establish is a broader parliamentary agreement around one part of the constitutional argument.

That is new enough to matter.

In May, Holyrood voted by 72 to 55 for an amended motion calling on the UK Government to make a Section 30 order transferring the necessary referendum power. That majority broadly reflected the pro-independence strength of the Parliament.

Tuesday's motion reached 84 votes because the proposition was different.

Labour was not asked to endorse independence. It was able to affirm Scotland's right to decide while

maintaining that no case has yet been made for exercising that right through another referendum now.

The SNP and Greens can therefore point to a parliamentary majority for independence-supporting parties and an even larger majority accepting the principle of Scotland's right to determine its constitutional future.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats can point to the 2014 result, the SNP's failure to win its own majority in May and the absence of agreement on when another referendum should be held.

Reform can argue that Holyrood's time should be spent on devolved government rather than another constitutional debate.

And Westminster still holds the legal power required to turn any parliamentary declaration into a referendum under the existing settlement.

The 84–18 result resolves none of those disputes.

Instead, it defines them more precisely.

The argument is no longer simply between MSPs who believe Scotland has a right to choose and those who reject that proposition. Labour's vote has made that division less straightforward.

The remaining disagreement is over what turns the right to decide from a principle into an exercisable democratic process: an election result, a sustained polling majority, an agreement between governments, some other defined threshold, or a decision ultimately retained by the UK Government.

Holyrood has now answered one question by a large margin.

It has said Scotland has the right to decide.

It has not decided who determines when Scotland gets to exercise it.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 24 September 2026

Oracle Invokes Force Majeure on Major US Project While Scotland Is Moving Government Into Oracle

Read online: <https://modern.scot/oracle-invokes-force-majeure-on-major-us-project-while-scotland-is-moving-government-into-oracle/>



More than £51 billion in Scottish Government payments passed through Oracle Cloud in its first year. The platform now carries HR, payroll, finance and purchasing across central government and 32 public bodies, while John Swinney's administration plans to extend its use. The data is hosted in the UK — but physical location alone does not place information held by a US-controlled cloud provider beyond the potential reach of US legal process.

Oracle, the American technology company now carrying some of the Scottish Government's most important internal administrative systems, has issued a force-majeure notice in connection with a vast new data-centre project in New Mexico after potential delays in securing power for the site.

The notice concerns Project Jupiter, a 1,400-acre artificial-intelligence data-centre campus in the United States. It does not concern the Scottish Government's Oracle Cloud service, which is hosted separately in the UK.

Over six years, beginning under Nicola Sturgeon and continuing through Humza Yousaf and John Swinney, the Scottish Government has moved human resources, payroll, finance and purchasing functions away from ageing public-sector systems and onto Oracle Cloud. The platform now serves the Scottish Government itself and another 32 public organisations. During its first year of operation, more than £51 billion of payments passed through it.

Under the plans now being pursued by Swinney's administration, Oracle's role is not shrinking. It is being extended.

The Scottish Government's five-year organisational plan says further Oracle Cloud technology will be enabled for finance, while the government intends to replace its Staff Directory with an Oracle Cloud solution in 2027 and introduce Oracle Cloud Helpdesk self-service tools for HR services. A separate Oracle Enterprise Performance Management system is being developed for planning, budgeting, forecasting, reporting and financial management, including work intended to support the Scottish Budget process.

In March this year, the Scottish Government also awarded IBM UK a contract worth up to £55 million, excluding VAT, for Oracle integration and support. The procurement notice explicitly provides for further stabilisation, optimisation and the potential expansion of the Oracle platform to additional customers and modules.

The significance of the New Mexico development for Scotland is therefore not that the American project and Scotland's UK cloud environment are technically connected. It is that a company becoming increasingly

embedded in the machinery of Scottish government is simultaneously undertaking an exceptional global expansion in cloud and artificial-intelligence infrastructure.

UK-hosted does not mean Scotland's data sits outside US legal reach

Audit Scotland has established that Scottish Government customer data is held at Oracle's UK cloud data centres. That provides an important measure of data residency. It does not, by itself, settle the separate question of legal jurisdiction over the company holding the information.

Scotland does not become subject to American law simply because the Scottish Government buys services from Oracle. Oracle, however, is a US-headquartered technology company, and United States law expressly provides for certain legal demands to reach information held outside American territory by covered providers.

The relevant provision is Section 2713 of Title 18 of the United States Code, introduced in 2018 through the Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data Act, generally known as the CLOUD Act.

The law requires a provider of electronic communication or remote computing services, when subject to the applicable obligations under the Stored Communications Act, to preserve, back up or disclose communications and customer records within its possession, custody or control regardless of whether the information is located inside or outside the United States.

The significance is precise. The location of a server in Britain is not, by itself, an absolute jurisdictional barrier against lawful US process.

That does not mean American authorities have unrestricted access to Scottish Government systems. They do not. Applicable legal procedures and statutory requirements remain necessary, and whether particular information falls within a provider's possession, custody or control is itself legally significant.

Nor does the evidence examined for this article establish that Scottish Government information held by Oracle has been disclosed to US authorities.

What the law establishes is narrower but consequential: "stored in the UK" and "incapable of being reached through US legal process" are not equivalent statements.

The United Kingdom and United States also operate a bilateral Data Access Agreement authorised by the CLOUD Act. The agreement entered into force on 3 October 2022 and provides a mechanism through which qualifying lawful orders for electronic evidence connected with serious crime can be directed across the two jurisdictions, subject to safeguards contained in the agreement.

Physical location, therefore, is only one dimension of data sovereignty. The nationality and legal exposure of the company operating the infrastructure can be another.

For Scotland, that adds a jurisdictional dimension to an existing technological dependency. As more public bodies, financial functions and government processes are placed on Oracle, Scotland is depending not only on the availability and resilience of one platform but on a corporate provider whose legal obligations can arise outside Scotland and outside the United Kingdom.

What Oracle has actually done in New Mexico

On Thursday, Reuters reported that Oracle had issued a force-majeure notice to a Blue Owl unit involved in developing Project Jupiter in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, citing potential delays in securing power.

Force majeure is a contractual mechanism used where specified circumstances interfere with performance of a contract. Its effect depends on the contract and the event concerned.

The reported notice does not amount to a declaration that Oracle itself has failed, nor does it apply across Oracle's worldwide cloud operations.

Reuters reported that securing power for the New Mexico site is Oracle's responsibility under the contract. Reporting around the notice indicates that Oracle is seeking to preserve its contractual position if the project fails to become operational according to its planned timetable.

Oracle has said Project Jupiter remains on schedule.

The New Mexico development is not the site hosting Scottish Government finance and personnel data.

That geographical separation, however, does not remove the broader relevance of Oracle's corporate position to Scotland. Scotland is increasingly reliant on services provided by the same company.

How Scotland reached Oracle

Scotland's dependence on the platform did not begin with John Swinney.

The Shared Services Programme began in 2020, when Nicola Sturgeon was First Minister. Its origins lay in recognition that the Scottish Government's existing finance and personnel systems had become an increasing organisational risk.

The systems being replaced included the Scottish Government Enterprise Accounting System, known as SEAS, and its electronic human-resources platform, e-HR. Both had been in place for many years and were described by government as no longer fit for purpose.

The programme's outline business case was approved in 2021 and its original business case followed in April 2022.

A selection exercise concluded that Oracle Fusion Cloud was the best fit commercially and functionally for the Scottish Government.

The original cost range for the programme was £22.4 million to £26 million including VAT, or £18.4 million to £22 million excluding VAT.

The cost subsequently increased substantially.

By September 2023 the programme had been rebaselined at £46 million to £52 million including VAT. Following a further delay in implementation, the March 2024 estimate rose to between £63 million and £66 million.

The Scottish Government's final programme closure report records a cost of £59.5 million for implementing the Oracle Cloud platform after VAT recovery. A further £4.5 million was attributed to Enterprise Performance Management work, producing a stated total delivery cost of £64 million.

Oracle Cloud went live on 1 October 2024.

The sequence crosses three administrations. The programme began and Oracle was selected during Sturgeon's premiership. The procurement and implementation continued through Humza Yousaf's period as First Minister. The system became operational after Swinney took office, and his administration is now pursuing wider use of Oracle Cloud.

Thirty-two public bodies share the platform

Oracle is not simply an accounting program used by officials inside St Andrew's House.

A Scottish Government freedom-of-information response states that Oracle Cloud was implemented in the Scottish Government and 32 public-sector organisations on 1 October 2024.

They include National Records of Scotland, Revenue Scotland, Social Security Scotland, Transport Scotland, Education Scotland, the Scottish Public Pensions Agency, the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, Disclosure Scotland, the Care Inspectorate, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the Scottish Housing Regulator.

Other organisations include the Crofting Commission, Food Standards Scotland, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, Consumer Scotland, Environmental Standards Scotland, Community Justice Scotland and the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner.

The presence of those organisations on the shared service does not mean that every operational database they hold has been transferred to Oracle.

Social Security Scotland's use of the platform, for example, does not establish that benefit entitlement calculations or complete claimant records themselves are operated through Oracle. Nor does the evidence establish that Scotland has placed health records, social-care records or every form of citizen information into one Oracle database.

The documented functions are nevertheless fundamental to the operation of government: HR, payroll, finance and purchasing.

The Scottish Government says that during the first year of Oracle Cloud operation the platform recorded almost four million unique logins, more than £51 billion of payments, 12 successful payrolls, 750,000 timesheets, 280,000 changes to personal details, 81,000 requisition lines and 33,000 journal postings.

This is the point at which dependency becomes measurable.

When one organisation buys software from a supplier, there is a procurement relationship. When central government and dozens of public bodies depend on the same platform to administer staff, purchasing and money, there is also a concentration of operational dependency.

These are not peripheral functions. They form part of the machinery through which organisations employ people, authorise spending, process transactions and carry out day-to-day administration.

The Scottish Government's approach reduces the fragmentation created by multiple ageing systems.

It also reduces separation between organisations that previously depended on different arrangements.

Oracle is responsible for recovery on its side

Audit Scotland examined the controls surrounding Oracle following implementation.

Its 2024/25 audit states that Oracle is responsible on its side for service continuity and disaster recovery, software maintenance, customer support, backups and the recovery and recreation of Scottish Government Oracle data following a cyber incident.

The auditors examined a SOC 2 service-auditor report covering the Oracle environment from implementation

through the end of the financial year.

Audit Scotland concluded that sufficient assurance had been obtained that controls designed to protect Scottish Government customer data at Oracle's UK cloud data centres were operating effectively within the scope of the work examined.

Database and configuration backups were also being carried out and tested according to schedules specified by the Scottish Government.

There was an important limit to that assurance.

Audit Scotland recorded that the SOC 2 work did not test the operating effectiveness of full-stack disaster-recovery controls. It was told that a separate assessment of Oracle's business-continuity and disaster-recovery arrangements was conducted annually.

That is not evidence that disaster recovery would fail. It defines the boundary of what that particular audit established.

As more government functions are moved onto a common platform, the effectiveness of continuity and recovery arrangements becomes correspondingly more important.

Scotland has already seen what concentration can mean

The move to Oracle has not been free of operational problems.

Audit Scotland found that the decision to proceed with the October 2024 launch was reasonable, but some pre-implementation criteria had not been met.

Management had also not anticipated the volume of support tickets generated after implementation.

When auditors surveyed Oracle Cloud user bodies, 19 reported difficulties involving delayed reporting functionality and resulting manual work. Fourteen raised issues involving HR and payroll functionality. Thirteen reported difficulties with purchase-to-pay functionality which prevented some organisations from raising purchase orders or making payments to certain suppliers during October and November 2024.

Those problems were associated with implementation and operation of the new system. They were not evidence of a failure of Oracle's underlying UK cloud data centres.

They did, however, demonstrate the consequence of using a common platform. A difficulty in one shared system can be experienced simultaneously across multiple public organisations.

The Scottish Government's own March 2026 closure report says technical problems in Oracle's Time and Labour module had proved difficult to diagnose and resolve and were still being worked on with Oracle in January 2026.

Shared infrastructure therefore has two characteristics at the same time. It can consolidate expertise, controls and systems that were previously fragmented. It can also concentrate the effect of technical or operational problems.

The next phase is expansion

The Scottish Government is continuing further into Oracle rather than moving away from it.

Its 2026–31 organisational plan says that by 2027 it will enable additional Oracle Cloud technology for finance.

The same plan says the existing Staff Directory will be replaced with an Oracle Cloud solution in 2027 and Oracle Cloud Helpdesk self-service tools will be introduced for HR queries.

The Enterprise Performance Management project extends the platform further into financial administration.

The Scottish Government describes Oracle EPM as a suite of cloud software and processes intended to support planning, budgeting, forecasting, reporting and financial and operational performance.

Its programme closure report states that the technology is intended to support the Scottish Budget process.

Oracle EPM was still being developed after the main platform went live, with further functionality scheduled during 2026.

Meanwhile, the March 2026 contract award for Oracle systems-integration and support services explicitly provides for the “potential expansion” of the Oracle platform to additional customers and modules.

The direction is therefore documented.

More functions are being built around Oracle. More integration is planned. And provision exists for more organisations or modules to be added.

Every additional function placed on the platform increases the range of processes dependent on it. Every additional organisation expands the number of public bodies sharing that dependency.

Replacing a deeply integrated enterprise platform is also fundamentally different from cancelling an ordinary software subscription. Processes, staff structures, financial controls, data models, integrations, training and support arrangements become built around it.

The deeper that integration becomes, the greater the practical cost and complexity of changing supplier.

Oracle itself is expanding at extraordinary scale

Scotland’s move further into Oracle is taking place while Oracle itself is undergoing a major transformation driven by artificial-intelligence infrastructure.

The company’s latest filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission shows capital expenditure of \$28.5 billion in the three months to 31 August 2026.

In the equivalent period a year earlier the figure was \$8.5 billion.

Oracle says the increase was primarily caused by the expansion of its data centres.

During the quarter, the company generated \$23.1 billion of operating cash flow. After \$28.5 billion of capital expenditure, Oracle reported negative free cash flow of approximately \$5.4 billion.

It held approximately \$36.4 billion in cash and cash equivalents at the end of August.

The scale of spending needs equally careful context.

Oracle reported record quarterly revenue of \$19.3 billion, up 30 per cent year on year. Cloud revenue reached \$11.6 billion and cloud-infrastructure revenue rose 121 per cent to \$7.4 billion.

The company reported remaining performance obligations of \$664 billion.

Oracle has stated in its SEC filing that it believes its cash, operating cash generation and available financing will be sufficient to meet working-capital requirements, committed capital expenditure and contractual obligations for at least the next 12 months, and that it expects its sources of liquidity and access to additional financing to remain sufficient thereafter.

The evidence therefore does not establish that Oracle cannot meet its obligations.

It does establish the scale and speed of a capital programme substantially larger than the one the company was running only a year earlier.

Project Jupiter shows the scale of that expansion

Project Jupiter is part of that build-out.

The proposed New Mexico campus covers approximately 1,400 acres and is intended to provide enormous computing capacity for artificial-intelligence workloads.

The project has faced difficulties surrounding the infrastructure required to power it.

Reuters reported earlier this month that approximately \$18 billion of debt associated with Project Jupiter was trading below par amid investor concern about the project, Oracle's growing debt burden and regulatory obstacles affecting the development.

On 24 September, Reuters reported that Oracle had issued the force-majeure notice citing potential delays in securing power.

The notice relates to that project.

For Scotland, its importance lies not in a direct technical connection to Edinburgh, but in what it reveals about the scale of the commitments being undertaken by the company on which Scotland is increasingly relying.

Scotland is no longer simply buying software

The Scottish Government's relationship with Oracle has moved beyond the purchase of a single software product.

A growing part of the administrative state is now operating through the Oracle environment.

The platform supports HR, payroll, finance and purchasing across the Scottish Government and 32 public bodies. Tens of billions of pounds have passed through it. Suppliers interact with the system. Additional functions are being developed. Further expansion is contemplated.

That creates several forms of dependency at once.

There is technological dependency: essential administrative functions depend on the continued operation of the platform.

There is operational dependency: multiple bodies share common systems, support structures and recovery arrangements.

There is commercial dependency: the greater the degree of integration, the more complex and costly substitution becomes.

And there is jurisdictional dependency: Scotland can determine where it requires data to be hosted, but it cannot determine the laws that apply to the company providing the service.

The CLOUD Act makes the last of those particularly clear.

A UK data centre is a physical location. It is not, by itself, an absolute legal boundary around information held within the possession, custody or control of a provider subject to applicable US law.

There is no evidence presented here that Scottish Government Oracle data has been obtained by US authorities.

The point is structural rather than accusatory.

By moving more administration onto a US-controlled platform, Scotland is accepting that part of the infrastructure on which government depends exists within a corporate and legal environment Scotland does not itself control.

A decision made over several governments

The origins of the programme explain why a simple political attribution would be misleading.

The ageing systems needed replacement. That problem was identified and the new programme developed under Sturgeon.

Oracle was selected during that period.

The programme then continued through Yousaf's administration before going live during Swinney's.

The current government has inherited a functioning Oracle platform but has also made a documented choice to expand its use rather than hold it at its original scope.

The result is not an Oracle dependency attributable to one First Minister.

It is an infrastructure direction developed over successive Scottish administrations and now moving into a further stage under Swinney.

Why this matters now

The Scottish Government had a genuine problem to solve. Its old finance and human-resources systems were ageing, increasingly risky and no longer fit for the organisation they were expected to support.

A modern shared cloud platform offers substantial advantages: common processes, integrated systems, regular updates, consistent controls, specialised security, central support and disaster-recovery arrangements.

Those advantages do not remove the consequences of concentration.

The more government functions are consolidated onto one platform, the more the resilience of government becomes tied to the resilience of that platform.

The more public bodies use it, the broader the impact of a common problem can become.

The more business processes are designed around it, the harder the platform becomes to replace.

And where the supplier is controlled from another jurisdiction, the laws of that jurisdiction can remain relevant even when the data itself is physically stored in Britain.

None of this establishes an immediate Scottish systems emergency arising from Project Jupiter.

It establishes something longer-term and more important.

Oracle has become part of Scotland's administrative infrastructure.

Scotland is continuing to deepen that relationship.

And the country's exposure is no longer confined to whether a particular piece of software works on a particular day. It now extends to the technical resilience, commercial position, corporate decisions and legal jurisdiction surrounding the company on which that infrastructure increasingly depends.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 24 September 2026

Scotland's Lost Citizens: 1,133 Drug-Use Deaths in 2025 as John Swinney Declares a Public Health Emergency

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-lost-citizens-1133-drug-use-deaths-in-2025-as-john-swinney-declares-a-public-health-emergency/>



Scotland registered 1,133 drug-use deaths in 2025, an increase of 116 in a year. The average person who died was 46. The deaths came during a year in which Scotland recorded its lowest number of births since national records began in 1855, while cocaine, nitazenes and combinations of multiple drugs continued to reshape the illicit market. Three weeks before the figures were published, First Minister John Swinney told Parliament that his government would treat drug use as a public-health emergency.

Scotland recorded 1,133 drug-use deaths in 2025.

The average person who died was 46.

In the national statistics they appear together as one annual figure. Outside those tables, the deaths occurred one person at a time: in homes, hospitals and communities, leaving parents without adult children, children without parents, partners without partners, and friends and neighbours without people who had occupied a place in their lives.

The deaths came during another significant year in Scotland's population history. Only 45,067 babies were born in 2025, the lowest annual number since national records began in 1855. There were 61,726 deaths from all causes, leaving Scotland with 16,659 more deaths than births. It was the eleventh consecutive year in which deaths exceeded births.

The two sets of statistics describe different problems and should not be confused with one another. Drug deaths do not explain Scotland's falling birth rate, and demographic change does not explain why an individual person dies through drug use. But together they establish part of the national setting in which these deaths are occurring: Scotland is already experiencing natural population decline, while more than a thousand additional lives ended through drug use, many decades before old age.

Migration continues to prevent that natural decrease from becoming an overall population fall. Scotland's population grew by only about 2,200 in the year to mid-2025 because net migration outweighed a natural decrease of about 16,200 during that particular twelve-month period.

Migration can change a national population total. It cannot replace an individual person in the family or community that has lost them.

Swinney Declares a Public-Health Emergency

On 1 September, three weeks before National Records of Scotland published the 2025 mortality figures, John Swinney used his Programme for Government speech to place drugs within the language of emergency.

“We will treat drug use as a public health emergency,” the First Minister told the Scottish Parliament.

He linked the commitment to an additional £250 million through the National Mission on drugs, further residential rehabilitation provision and additional mental-health support.

The declaration did not begin Scotland’s public-health approach to drugs. The National Mission, naloxone distribution, Medication Assisted Treatment standards, residential rehabilitation investment and other harm-reduction programmes all pre-date Swinney’s September speech. What changed was the prominence of the language: the public-health emergency was placed explicitly within the new five-year Programme for Government.

The statistics published on 23 September now provide the first large mortality measure against which that renewed emphasis will be read.

There were 1,133 drug-use deaths registered in 2025, up 11 per cent from 1,017 in 2024. The total remains below the record 1,339 deaths registered in 2020 and is the sixth-highest annual figure in the series.

The age-standardised mortality rate increased from 19.1 to 21.4 deaths per 100,000 people, although National Records of Scotland cautions that the difference between the two annual rates is not statistically significant because their confidence intervals overlap.

The number of people who died unquestionably rose. The statistical evidence does not support claiming an equally certain increase in the underlying age-adjusted mortality rate.

Lives Ending Among Ages 35 to 54

The age profile tells another part of the story.

In 2000, the average age of a person recorded in Scotland’s drug-use death statistics was 32. By 2025 it had risen to 46. The highest mortality rates are now among people aged 35 to 44 and 45 to 54.

These are not predominantly deaths at the end of ordinary life expectancy. They are concentrated in decades in which people are often raising children, helping older parents, working, maintaining households and sustaining relationships accumulated over many years.

That does not make a person valuable because of their economic output. The worth of somebody’s life cannot be calculated from whether they were employed, paying tax or caring for somebody else. It does mean that premature death removes a person from a web of relationships that public statistics cannot measure.

The increase in 2025 was also overwhelmingly concentrated among men.

There were 830 male drug-use deaths, 131 more than in 2024, an increase of 19 per cent. Female deaths fell by 15 to 303, the lowest female total since 2017. After adjustment for age, the male mortality rate was 32.3 deaths per 100,000, compared with 11.1 among women.

The national increase was therefore not evenly distributed between men and women. It was driven by a sharp rise in male deaths.

One Death Can Leave More Than One Empty Place

The annual National Records of Scotland release can tell us the age, sex, location and toxicology associated with the people who died. It says much less about the lives surrounding them.

For that, Scotland has another dataset.

Public Health Scotland's National Drug-Related Deaths Database assembles information from health records, pathology, police and other sources. Its newest detailed analysis concerns deaths registered in 2021 and 2022, not the 1,133 deaths registered in 2025, so its personal characteristics cannot simply be transferred onto the latest group.

What the 2022 records show is nevertheless important to understanding the human reach of drug mortality.

Public Health Scotland recorded 387 children who lost a parent or parental figure as a result of a drug-related death in that year alone.

Sixty per cent of the people who died lived alone. More than half lived in Scotland's most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods. Two thirds had been in contact during the previous six months with a service that had the potential to address problematic drug use or provide harm reduction, including treatment services, prisons, police custody or hospital care.

Around 29 per cent had been discharged from an acute hospital admission during the preceding six months. Fifty-four per cent had a recent medical condition recorded and half had a recent psychiatric condition.

Those findings complicate the idea that people dying through drugs are simply hidden from public services until the day of their death. Many were known somewhere within Scotland's health, justice or treatment systems.

A person may appear once in the death statistics while their absence appears repeatedly in the lives around them.

The Geography of Loss

Drug-use mortality is also distributed very unevenly across Scotland.

In 2025 the age-standardised death rate in the most deprived fifth of Scottish neighbourhoods was 15 times the rate in the least deprived fifth. For deaths from all causes, the comparable gap is around twofold.

That does not establish deprivation as the sole cause of any individual death. It does establish that the burden of drug mortality is extraordinarily concentrated within poorer communities.

Across the five years from 2021 to 2025, Glasgow City, Dundee City, North Ayrshire, Inverclyde, West Dunbartonshire and East Ayrshire all had drug-use death rates statistically above the Scotland average.

The most recent annual movement was not uniform. Deaths increased in 20 council areas, decreased in ten and were unchanged in two. East Ayrshire recorded the largest numerical increase, with 27 more deaths than in 2024, followed by North Ayrshire with 25 more. North Lanarkshire recorded the largest fall, with 16 fewer.

Scotland's drug deaths are therefore national in scale but locally concentrated, falling particularly heavily on communities already carrying wider burdens of poor health, lower incomes and earlier mortality.

This Is No Longer Simply a Heroin Story

The substances found in Scotland's deaths also show that the crisis has changed shape.

Opiates and opioids remain central. They were implicated in 881 deaths, 78 per cent of the 2025 total. Heroin or morphine was implicated in 468 deaths and methadone in 338.

But cocaine was implicated in 589 deaths — 52 per cent of all drug-use deaths.

That was 110 more than in 2024, an increase of 23 per cent and the highest number recorded since the cocaine series began in 2008.

The figure does not mean 589 people died from cocaine alone. Cocaine was the only implicated drug in 101 deaths, or 9 per cent of the total.

Most of the mortality therefore sits inside combinations of substances.

More than one drug was implicated in 78 per cent of all drug-use deaths in Scotland during 2025.

Benzodiazepines were implicated in 433 deaths. Gabapentin or pregabalin was implicated in 330. Street benzodiazepines, which had become one of the defining features of the crisis around the 2020 peak, were implicated in 300 deaths, down substantially from 879 in 2020.

Cocaine has simultaneously moved in the opposite direction.

The change is also visible before death. Among people beginning specialist drug treatment in Scotland during 2024/25, cocaine had become the most commonly reported main drug, accounting for 32 per cent of initial assessments. Heroin accounted for 25 per cent.

Scotland's treatment system developed over decades around a population in which opioid dependence was dominant. It now faces a drug market in which opioid use remains widespread while cocaine and combinations of several substances have become increasingly prominent.

Then Came the Nitazenes

The greatest new uncertainty comes from synthetic opioids.

Nitazenes were implicated in 247 drug-use deaths registered in 2025 — more than one in five. Etonitazene alone was implicated in 215.

The apparent increase is dramatic: 76 deaths involving nitazenes were recorded in 2024.

But those numbers cannot be read as a clean measure of how much nitazene use increased. Scotland also became better at finding them.

National Records of Scotland says post-mortem testing for nitazenes was limited before 2023 and that additional compounds have progressively been incorporated into routine toxicology. Etonitazene itself was not added to routine testing across Scotland until May 2025.

The rise from 76 to 247 therefore reflects a changing drug supply alongside an improved ability to identify synthetic opioids after death. The available evidence cannot precisely separate those two effects.

Public Health Scotland's live intelligence nevertheless confirms that nitazenes have become established

within the illicit supply. Its RADAR system says the compounds have been detected across Scotland and are commonly found as contaminants in drugs sold as heroin, benzodiazepines and oxycodone.

In March 2025, Public Health Scotland warned of fatal and near-fatal overdoses among people using heroin, including sudden collapses requiring repeated naloxone. Rapid testing found a nitazene-type opioid in some of the samples associated with those events.

The danger is not simply that a more potent drug exists. It is that a person may consume it without intending to buy it.

How the Drugs Reach Scotland

The drugs implicated in Scottish deaths do not all follow one route into the country.



Cocaine begins principally in the international cocaine-producing regions of South America before entering European and British markets through freight, ports, aircraft, passengers and other smuggling routes. From there, wholesale criminal networks redistribute it within the UK and into Scotland.

One Scottish investigation showed that chain with unusual clarity. Police Scotland and the National Crime Agency intercepted about a tonne of cocaine at Dover in 2020, concealed inside a commercial consignment of bananas which had arrived from Ecuador. Six men were

later convicted of conspiring to bring around £100 million of cocaine into the Scottish market.

The case does not establish how the cocaine implicated in any particular 2025 death entered Scotland. It demonstrates the scale and international reach of one documented Scottish supply route.

The organised market beneath that trade is extensive. As of March 2025, Scottish authorities had 94 serious organised crime groups mapped as operating in Scotland, involving 1,202 individuals. Seventy per cent of those groups were involved in drug crime, with cocaine and cannabis the most common drug commodities.

Once large consignments enter the UK market, drugs can be divided repeatedly and moved through national and regional networks until they reach individual towns, housing estates and street-level markets.

Nitazenes create a different enforcement problem. The National Crime Agency says the synthetic opioids are manufactured in laboratories in countries including China and can be smuggled into the UK using fast parcels and postal systems. Their potency means that relatively small amounts can be commercially significant.

A UK investigation concluded this year with a supplier admitting conspiracy to distribute nitazenes. The NCA said pills advertised as oxycodone contained isotonitazene and linked the operation to fatal overdoses.

The route from an overseas laboratory or South American producer to somebody consuming a tablet or powder in Scotland can therefore involve international manufacturing, freight or postal systems, UK organised crime, Scottish distribution networks and local dealers.

By the time the substance reaches the person using it, its contents may no longer be what they believe they purchased.

A Market in Which the Buyer May Not Know What They Have Bought

That uncertainty is becoming central to Scotland's response.

On the same day the 2025 death figures were published, the Scottish Government announced that Scotland's first local drug-checking service would open in Glasgow in October.

People will be able to submit a sample for rapid testing and receive information about what it contains together with harm-reduction advice. Samples will then be forwarded to a national testing and research laboratory at the Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science in Dundee for more complete analysis.

The Scottish Government has invested more than £1.7 million in the pilot. Aberdeen and Dundee have Home Office licences for similar services, while an Edinburgh facility is preparing an application.

The programme is intended to do two things at once: provide information to the individual person about the sample in front of them, and feed intelligence into Scotland's national early-warning system about what is moving through the illicit market.

Its effectiveness in reducing deaths remains to be established. Its creation reflects the problem now evident in the toxicology: the identity and potency of a drug can no longer safely be inferred from what it was sold as.

Higher Than Every Country in the Available European Comparison

Scotland's international position remains exceptional.

National Records of Scotland says that, on the information currently available from the European Union Drugs Agency, Scotland has a higher rate of drug-induced deaths than any of the countries included in the European comparison.

That finding requires qualification.

The countries are not all reporting data from the same year. Death certification, coding practices and access to detailed post-mortem toxicology differ between jurisdictions. The European agency describes its figures as minimum estimates because deaths can be missed or classified differently.

Scotland has detailed toxicology and records all substances considered to have contributed to a death, which National Records of Scotland says may partly explain why its recorded rate is higher.

The methodological differences do not make Scotland's mortality disappear. They mean that the international figures should not be treated as a perfectly harmonised league table.

Scotland Has Built More Protection

The 1,133 deaths have occurred despite a substantial expansion of Scotland's harm-reduction and treatment infrastructure.

Take-home naloxone distribution reached 36,955 kits during 2025/26, the highest annual total since Scotland's national programme began. Public Health Scotland estimated programme reach at 88.9 per cent of people considered at risk of opioid overdose.

Waiting-time performance is also comparatively strong in many community services. Between January and March 2026, 94.2 per cent of drug referrals beginning treatment did so within three weeks, above Scotland's

90 per cent standard.

Medication Assisted Treatment standards have been introduced and residential rehabilitation capacity has expanded. Glasgow opened the Thistle safer-drug-consumption facility in 2025. Drug checking is now beginning. Public Health Scotland's RADAR programme provides faster information on emerging substances than the annual death statistics can.

Other measures are less encouraging.

The Scottish Government's own National Mission monitoring report records an estimated minimum of 28,015 people prescribed opioid substitution therapy in 2024/25, 7 per cent fewer than the 30,058 recorded in 2020/21 immediately before the National Mission began.

The Government says progress has been made in some measures while acknowledging gaps in knowledge about non-opioid and polydrug use.

The Scottish Parliament reached a similar conclusion from a different direction. A cross-committee report published in March identified the need for greater urgency and an "implementation gap" between policy and delivery.

Scotland therefore enters Swinney's declared public-health emergency with more interventions than it possessed when deaths peaked in 2020, but also with an illicit drug market that is changing around those interventions.

In Glasgow, Specialist Services Are Being Redesigned Under Financial Pressure

The tension between national ambition and local delivery became particularly visible in Glasgow during the same week the mortality figures were released.

On 23 September, Glasgow City Integration Joint Board was asked to approve progression of a redesign of two specialist services — the Enhanced Drug Treatment Service and the Complex Needs Service — and their replacement by a combined successor service.

The proposal is part of a wider financial recovery programme. Glasgow's health and social care partnership said the new combined service would have a budget of £1.2 million, retain heroin-assisted treatment and seek to preserve the strongest elements of the existing services while creating an intended saving of about £2 million from their current combined budgets.

The Enhanced Drug Treatment Service is particularly unusual.

It was developed following Glasgow's 2015 HIV outbreak and opened in December 2019 for adults with chronic opioid dependency who had not benefited from conventional opioid-substitution treatment or sustained engagement with mainstream drug services.

Its treatment includes supervised pharmaceutical diamorphine, alongside medical, pharmacy, nursing and social support, housing assistance, overdose prevention, naloxone, blood-borne-virus work and other harm reduction.

By the time of the review, 74 people had been assessed and 53 had begun diamorphine-assisted treatment. Twenty-seven people remained open to the service. Around 70 per cent were men and three quarters were aged between 35 and 54 — the same broad ages in which Scotland's national drug-use death rates are now

highest.

The Glasgow review records a finding that requires both attention and restraint: there had been no deaths among people while they were receiving Enhanced Drug Treatment Service treatment.

The HSCP itself cautions that cause and effect cannot be attributed with confidence. The numbers are small, and the same review says reductions in street heroin use, street benzodiazepine use, emergency-department presentations, homelessness contacts and offending cannot be attributed to the service alone. Cocaine use among the group remained persistently high.

The review also identified substantial problems with the existing model. It described a very small caseload, high cost per patient, limited throughput, expensive medication and constraints in the pharmacy and physical estate. The HSCP calculated the cost at about £300,000 for each person with ongoing attendance across the service's first six and a half years.

The Complex Needs Service works with a different but overlapping group: adults experiencing combinations of substance use, complex trauma, mental illness, neurodiversity, acquired brain injury, homelessness or unsuitable accommodation, justice involvement and other severe disadvantage.

It was supporting 96 people in early April 2026, including 86 on its active caseload and ten in assessment, with a further six awaiting assessment.

The official paper does not describe the proposed merger as risk-free.

It identifies clinical, equality, public-health, workforce and system risks. It says people may experience harm if care becomes fragmented or transition is poorly managed, and warns of possible additional demand on emergency and acute services and the potential loss of specialist expertise.

The proposed mitigations include individual transition plans, overdose-prevention arrangements, safe prescribing and dispensing, clinical governance, service-user engagement and a fully costed successor model before implementation.

The same paper argues that Glasgow's wider response has changed since the specialist services were established, citing broader naloxone availability, proactive outreach, long-acting injectable buprenorphine, crisis outreach, the Thistle facility and other services as part of the system around the proposed successor model.

The Glasgow decision therefore captures the pressure beneath Scotland's national response. A government can promise more treatment and harm reduction nationally while a local health and social care partnership, facing its own financial position, simultaneously attempts to reorganise highly specialised services around a smaller budget.

Those positions are not necessarily contradictory. They do mean that the practical meaning of a public-health emergency will ultimately be determined through hundreds of decisions about which services remain available, in what form, and to whom.

The People Behind Next Year's Number Are Alive Right Now

The annual death statistics necessarily look backwards.

They tell Scotland what was registered in 2025 only after the people concerned have died, toxicology has been completed, causes have been established and the records have been assembled into a national release.

The drug market moves faster.

Cocaine's involvement has risen. Heroin and morphine involvement increased in 2025 for the first time since 2019. Street-benzodiazepine involvement has fallen substantially from its 2020 peak. Nitazenes have entered the supply, while toxicology has simultaneously become better at detecting them. More than three quarters of deaths now involve combinations of drugs.

The challenge for a public-health system is therefore not simply to repeat the interventions designed for the last version of Scotland's drug crisis. It is to identify what is changing while people are still alive.

Scotland cannot know what each of the 1,133 people who died through drug use in 2025 would otherwise have done with the years ahead of them. Statistics cannot record the birthdays they would have attended, the children they might have raised, the relatives they might have cared for, the work they might have done or the friendships that would have continued.

They can establish how early many of those lives ended. The average age was 46.

In the same year, Scotland registered 45,067 births, the fewest since records began in 1855, and 61,726 deaths from all causes. Migration continues to prevent the resulting natural decrease from becoming an overall population fall.

Migration can alter Scotland's population total. It cannot replace an individual person in the family or community that has lost them.

John Swinney has said Scotland will treat drug use as a public-health emergency. The next mortality figures will arrive after another year of naloxone distribution, treatment, rehabilitation, drug checking, synthetic-opioid surveillance and decisions over specialist services such as those now being redesigned in Glasgow.

Scotland recorded 1,133 drug-use deaths in 2025. Each appears once in the national statistics.

The space each person leaves behind cannot be counted so easily.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 23 September 2026

Who Gets the Fuel First? Inside Scotland's Plans for a Serious Supply Shortage

Read online: <https://modern.scot/who-gets-the-fuel-first-inside-scotlands-plans-for-a-serious-supply-shortage/>



As Scotland adapts to life after the Grangemouth refinery closure, the UK's emergency rationing frameworks face a unique challenge north of the border. From massive rail fuel dependencies to a glaring blindspot in food production, here is who gets the fuel first if the pumps run dry.

In a severe fuel shortage, an ambulance and an ordinary motorist arriving at Scottish filling stations could be

operating under different rules.

Emergency and critical-service vehicles can be given priority access to designated filling stations. Public purchases can be limited. Bulk fuel can be directed towards emergency services, utilities and public transport, while road diesel can be prioritised for commercial vehicles supporting food and health supply chains.

The powers are contained in Britain's National Emergency Plan for Fuel. They describe the measures available after a disruption has become serious enough that normal commercial distribution can no longer be relied upon to determine where all available fuel goes.

Scotland enters such planning with substantial requirements outside ordinary private motoring. More than 127,000 occupied households were recorded in the 2022 Census Oil central-heating category. Scottish farm machinery remains overwhelmingly diesel-powered. ScotRail's current contract specifies approximately 35 million litres of marked gas oil each year for diesel railway vehicles. Most of the CalMac fleet uses marine gas oil, while diesel generating stations remain available on several island electricity systems when network conditions require them.

Before Fuel Is Rationed

Formal restrictions on motorists sit towards the more severe end of the emergency arrangements.

Earlier responses are intended to keep the existing distribution system operating.

Fuel companies can be permitted to share information and coordinate supplies. Government has access to a reserve fleet of tankers. Military personnel trained to drive fuel tankers can be deployed if commercial distribution capacity becomes insufficient. Tanker drivers' hours can also be relaxed temporarily where circumstances justify it.

Emergency oil stocks can be released during a sufficiently serious international supply interruption.

Those measures are designed to increase supply or move existing fuel around the system before more restrictive controls become necessary.

If shortages deepen, a Designated Filling Station scheme can give emergency and critical-service vehicles priority access to selected forecourts. A Bulk Distribution Scheme allows fuel to be directed to critical services. A Commercial Distribution Scheme can prioritise road diesel for vehicles carrying goods in key supply chains. A Maximum Purchase Scheme can restrict the quantity bought by members of the public.

The emergency plan also provides for government allocation of imported petroleum products.

Scotland Has Already Seen Smaller Supply Disruptions

Scotland has already experienced events that show how the earlier stages of such a system operate.

When ScotRail's contracted fuel supplier, Harvest Energy, entered administration in 2025, the company was no longer able to fulfil the railway's fuel agreement.

ScotRail secured short-term supplies elsewhere before directly awarding a replacement contract to Highland Fuels. Its procurement documentation described the circumstances as involving extreme operational and contractual urgency and said continued fuel supply was necessary for the operation of critical national infrastructure.

The railway continued operating because another supplier was found.

Northern Scotland experienced a different disruption in January 2026.

Evidence gathered during the Competition and Markets Authority's heating-oil investigation recorded Aberdeen, Peterhead and Inverness terminals being unavailable for approximately two weeks.

Distributors serving northern customers obtained fuel from farther south, including Grangemouth. Tanker journeys lengthened, increasing driver hours and transport distances.

The National Risk Register describes the same type of adjustment in its planning for a sudden failure within the downstream fuel industry. Following the loss of a significant operator or facility, industry could require several weeks to complete the rerouting of supplies, even though alternative arrangements would begin immediately.

A terminal closure therefore does not necessarily remove fuel from the Scottish market. It can change where a tanker must travel before it begins its delivery round.

Homes Supplied by Tanker

For many rural households, the final part of the energy network is a road delivery.

Scotland's 2022 Census recorded 127,570 occupied households in its Oil central-heating category, equivalent to 5.1 per cent of occupied households nationally.

The largest proportions were found in rural and island authorities. In Na h-Eileanan Siar, 37.4 per cent of occupied households were recorded in the Oil category. Orkney stood at 28.1 per cent, Shetland at 23.4 per cent, Highland at 22.3 per cent, Aberdeenshire at 21.3 per cent and Dumfries and Galloway at 17.1 per cent.

UK Government estimates indicate that Orkney and Shetland have no domestic properties connected to mains gas. In Na h-Eileanan Siar, approximately 89 per cent of domestic properties were estimated to be outside the mains-gas network in 2024.

An oil-heated property holds fuel in a tank on the premises. That provides a buffer during a delivery

interruption, but the length of that buffer depends on how much fuel remains when disruption begins.

There is no national Scottish dataset showing normal household tank levels at a given point in time, so the number of days homes could continue without further deliveries cannot be calculated from the available records.

The National Risk Register identifies domestic heating among the services affected by a major refined-fuel disruption. It also includes commercial premises and care homes requiring consistent temperatures, with consequences expected to become more severe during winter.

The heating-oil disruption earlier this year provided a shorter test of the market.

The Competition and Markets Authority found that average prices paid by Scottish customers rose from 69p a litre in February 2026 to 113p in March. Wholesale prices accounted for most of the UK-wide retail increase.

Scottish delivery geography also increased costs. The CMA calculated an average of approximately two heating-oil households per square kilometre, the lowest density among the four UK nations.

Scottish distributors described delivery rounds commonly covering 50 to 100 miles. Some remote deliveries could approach 200 miles.

When a northern terminal is unavailable, those journeys can begin farther from the customer.

Farms and the Food Supply

The published emergency arrangements explicitly provide for road diesel to be prioritised for commercial vehicles carrying food through key supply chains.

The treatment of primary agricultural production is less explicit in the public summary of the plan.

Scottish agriculture remains heavily dependent on diesel machinery. The machinery module of the 2024 Scottish Agricultural Census recorded diesel as the fuel used by 82 per cent of the machinery reported. More than 51,000 pieces of machinery were included in the survey.

Separate UK Government energy estimates place agricultural petroleum consumption in Scotland at approximately 252.8 thousand tonnes of oil equivalent in 2024.

The figure reflects the machinery required for modern food production: tractors, loaders, cultivation equipment, harvesting machinery and other heavy plant.

The published National Emergency Plan identifies commercial vehicles supporting food supply chains as eligible for priority road diesel. It does not set out a separate guaranteed allocation for farms or primary food production.

The absence of a separate category does not establish that farms would be excluded. The public document is a summary of emergency powers rather than a complete operational schedule showing how individual businesses would be treated.

It does leave the relationship between production and distribution less clearly defined in the published arrangements.

Food distribution requires diesel for the vehicles carrying produce through the supply chain. Production can

require fuel before anything is available for those vehicles to collect.

There is also no published Scotland-wide measure showing normal diesel stocks held on farms from which the duration of an interruption could be calculated.

Thirty-Five Million Litres for the Railway

Public transport is expressly included among the critical services that can receive priority bulk deliveries.

ScotRail's latest contract specifies approximately 35 million litres of marked gas oil each year for diesel railway vehicles.

The requirement is spread across six principal delivery points.

Haymarket accounts for approximately 11 million litres annually. Inverness is specified at around seven million litres, Perth at 5.5 million, Eastfield and Corkerhill at four million each and Cadder at 2.5 million.

A further 200,000 litres of diesel is required annually for heating at Shields Depot in Glasgow.

Priority status for public transport provides a mechanism through which available bulk fuel could be directed towards railway operations during a shortage.

The published emergency plan does not guarantee that every existing service or timetable would continue during a severe national disruption.

Fuel for Lifeline Ferries

The same emergency category includes public transport at sea.

CalMac says it is custodian of 35 vessels. Thirty-one run on marine gas oil. Three more are marine-gas-oil/electric hybrids, while one is listed by the company as petroleum-fuelled.

Shetland Islands Council has separately estimated an annual requirement of approximately five million litres of marine gas oil for council vessels.

These fleets carry passengers, vehicles and freight between communities for which there is no alternative road connection.

The emergency plan provides a mechanism for public transport to receive priority bulk supplies. The public document does not specify individual ferry operators, routes or minimum service levels.

When Diesel Is Also Electricity

On several islands, diesel can also be required by the electricity system.

The Scottish Government identifies diesel generating stations on Shetland, Orkney, Lewis, South Uist, Barra and Islay.

They are backup plants rather than the normal primary source of electricity for those islands.

SSE recorded 137 GWh of generation from its Scottish island backup diesel sites during the year to March 2026, compared with 100 GWh the previous year. The company attributed the increase to transmission-line upgrade works.

Utilities are among the critical services that can receive priority bulk fuel deliveries under the emergency arrangements.

A period in which island generation was required at the same time as fuel distribution was constrained would place the electricity system alongside transport, heating and other users drawing from the same wider logistics network.

Emergency Stocks Do Not Sit at Every Forecourt

The UK maintains substantial emergency oil stocks.

At the end of 2025, official statistics recorded 11.2 million tonnes of oil stocks, approximately 85 per cent of them physically held in the UK.

The International Energy Agency requires the UK to maintain stocks equivalent to at least 90 days of net imports. Earlier official reporting placed UK stocks at around 120 days of net imports in July 2025.

These are national stockholding measures.

They do not mean that every Scottish filling station, farm, railway depot, ferry terminal or heating-oil distributor has three or four months of fuel stored nearby.

The total contains different products held at different locations. Part of the stockholding obligation can also be met through approved arrangements involving oil held outside the UK.

Releasing emergency stocks makes additional oil available to the national system. It must still be the required product and must still be transported from storage to the place where it will be used.

Grangemouth Changed the Route

Scotland's fuel-distribution system changed substantially in April 2025 when Grangemouth stopped refining crude oil.

The site became an import terminal.

Before the closure, Petroineos described its replacement arrangements to government officials as a "virtual pipeline".

The plans involved finished petroleum products sourced through its European trading operation, bulk storage in the Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp region, long-term shipping arrangements and products brought directly into the Grangemouth jetties.

The company also described approximately £30 million of investment in storage tanks and logistics at the site.

The UK Government's security-of-supply assessment concluded that the import-terminal model was capable of meeting Scotland's normal requirements.

Grangemouth is not Scotland's only route for fuel. Other terminals, ports, depots and UK distribution networks remain part of the system.

The National Emergency Plan addresses the circumstances in which normal arrangements cease to be sufficient.

A failed supplier can be replaced. Tankers can be sent to another terminal. Reserve vehicles and drivers can expand distribution capacity. Emergency stocks can be released.

If those measures are insufficient, access can begin to change.

Emergency vehicles can receive priority at designated filling stations. Bulk deliveries can be directed towards utilities and public transport. Commercial vehicles carrying food and health supplies can receive priority diesel. Purchases by the public can be limited. Imported fuel can be formally allocated.

At that stage, the availability of fuel somewhere in the national system and the ability of every customer to obtain it are no longer the same thing.

Where Scotland Uses Liquid Fuel — and Why

The figures below describe separate systems and should not be added together.

Use

Latest figure

What the fuel supports

Road transport

Approx. 2,248 ktoe of road diesel, 2024

Cars, vans, buses, freight and heavy goods vehicles

Agriculture

Approx. 252.8 ktoe, 2024

Tractors and heavy agricultural machinery used in food production

Agricultural machinery

Diesel reported for 82% of machinery in the 2024 survey module

Field work, cultivation, handling and other farm operations

Domestic heating

127,570 occupied households in the Census Oil category, 2022

Homes using delivered oil for central heating

Domestic heating — survey estimate

Approx. 142,000 households using oil as their primary heating fuel, 2024

Separate survey measure of household heating

ScotRail diesel fleet

Approx. 35 million litres of marked gas oil a year

Diesel railway vehicles

ScotRail depot heating

Approx. 200,000 litres a year

Heating at Shields Depot

CalMac

31 MGO vessels and 3 additional MGO/electric hybrids

Passenger, vehicle and freight ferry services

Shetland council vessels

Approx. 5 million litres of marine gas oil a year, procurement estimate

Council vessel operations and island transport

Island backup generation

137 GWh generated in 2025/26

Electricity supply when island network conditions require backup generation

Public administration

Approx. 49.2 ktoe, 2024

Petroleum use recorded across public-sector activity

Commercial activity

Approx. 52.0 ktoe, 2024

Non-road petroleum use in commercial activity

Road-diesel use is highest in North Lanarkshire, Glasgow and South Lanarkshire. Dumfries and Galloway recorded approximately 145.3 ktoe in 2024, including about 76 ktoe attributed to heavy goods vehicles, the highest HGV figure among Scotland's council areas.

Household oil produces a different geography. In the 2022 Census, 37.4 per cent of occupied households in Na h-Eileanan Siar were in the Oil category, followed by Orkney at 28.1 per cent, Shetland at 23.4 per cent, Highland at 22.3 per cent, Aberdeenshire at 21.3 per cent and Dumfries and Galloway at 17.1 per cent.

Among non-industrial residual-petroleum estimates, Aberdeenshire recorded approximately 98.6 ktoe in 2024, followed by Highland at around 77, Dumfries and Galloway at 49.2, and Perth and Kinross and the Scottish Borders at approximately 42.6 each.

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ENVIRONMENT | 23 September 2026

PFAS Detected at Nearly 90% of Scottish Surface-Water Sites Sampled by SEPA

Read online: <https://modern.scot/pfas-detected-at-nearly-90-of-scottish-surface-water-sites-sampled-by-sepa/>



Scotland's first expanded PFAS scoping programme tested 29 compounds at 97 surface-water and 37 groundwater locations. PFAS were detected at just under 90 per cent of the surface-water sites and around 60 per cent of groundwater sites, but SEPA says none of the 2025 samples exceeded the relevant environmental or groundwater standards. Monitoring is being expanded again in 2026.

PFAS were detected at almost nine out of ten Scottish surface-water sites examined in an expanded

monitoring programme carried out by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency during 2025.

The chemicals were also detected at around 60 per cent of the groundwater sites included in the work.

Those figures establish widespread detection within the locations SEPA chose to investigate. They do not establish that 90 per cent of all Scottish rivers, lochs or other surface waters contain PFAS, because the programme was a scoping exercise rather than a statistically representative national survey and site selection included locations where releases could plausibly occur.

They also do not record breaches of the relevant environmental standards. SEPA says none of the samples collected through the 2025 programme exceeded the applicable environmental or groundwater standards against which it made its initial comparison.

The combination of frequent detection and no recorded exceedance is central to understanding the first large dataset. Scotland has begun to establish where PFAS can be found in its water environment, but the monitoring programme is still being developed into a larger and more systematic picture.

134 locations and 29 PFAS compounds

SEPA examined 29 PFAS compounds at 97 surface-water sites and 37 groundwater sites during 2025. The agency carried out 283 samples in total and is increasing that to around 500 during 2026.

PFAS — per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances — are a large family of synthetic chemicals used because of properties including resistance to heat, water, oil and stains. They have been employed in products and industrial processes ranging from firefighting foams to coatings and consumer materials. Their persistence means some members of the family can remain in the environment for long periods.

Scotland has not started from zero. SEPA has PFAS monitoring data extending back to 2009. What changed in 2025 was the scale and design of the programme, giving the regulator a much broader initial map of occurrence in surface water and groundwater.

The first results show a geographical connection that will now require further monitoring. SEPA says higher concentrations were generally associated with locations where PFAS sources were already known or expected, including activities connected with higher historical use or emissions such as airports and landfill sites.

PFOS, one of the more established regulated PFAS compounds, was found at elevated levels most frequently in rivers close to activities or sites with the potential to release PFAS.

Groundwater concentrations were generally lower than those recorded in surface water. SEPA also said its early comparison suggests Scottish levels were generally lower than those observed in England, although the agency describes the programme as an initial scoping exercise and further monitoring is required before broader conclusions can be drawn.

Detection is not the same as a standards breach

The sensitivity of modern chemical analysis allows substances to be detected at concentrations far below regulatory thresholds. A reported detection therefore answers a different question from a reported exceedance.

In the 2025 SEPA dataset, PFAS were common in the sampled locations. None of those samples, however, exceeded the relevant environmental or groundwater standards used in the agency's initial assessment.

SEPA has also cautioned against using measurements in rivers and groundwater as a direct measure of human health exposure. Environmental monitoring identifies what is present in the environment and at what concentration. Drinking-water regulation, food exposure and other pathways require separate evidence.

That separation becomes particularly important because Scotland has a different monitoring regime for public drinking water.

What the drinking-water record shows

The Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland applies a regulatory standard of 0.1 micrograms per litre for the sum of 20 individually named PFAS compounds in public supplies.

Its annual report for 2024 records that Scottish Water analysed 5,615 samples for the sum of those PFAS compounds and none failed the standard. Scottish Water also monitored a further 29 PFAS compounds; the regulator reported that none exceeded the 0.1 micrograms-per-litre value either individually or in combination with the other monitored PFAS.

Those drinking-water results should not be merged with SEPA's environmental-water figures. They involve different samples, different monitoring purposes and different regulatory questions.

The broader public-water record has also remained highly compliant. The Scottish Government reported in August that 99.88 per cent of regulatory tests at consumers' taps in 2025 met required standards. That figure covers drinking-water parameters generally and is not a PFAS-specific compliance rate.

Scotland is increasing the search

The next stage is larger rather than conclusive.

SEPA is expanding from 283 PFAS samples in 2025 to around 500 during 2026. The UK PFAS Plan, published in February and updated in August, records the Scottish programme alongside monitoring elsewhere in the UK

and states that Scotland will continue annual PFAS monitoring and reporting.

The plan also records that SEPA and the Scottish Government will consider whether a geographical information system approach being used in England to identify and prioritise potential PFAS source areas should be applied in Scotland.

Such an approach could bring together monitoring results with the known geography of airports, landfills, industrial sites, wastewater infrastructure and other possible sources. The 2025 findings already indicate why that spatial work may be useful: concentrations were not distributed randomly across the sampled locations, with higher values generally associated with known or expected source areas.

At the same time, the present dataset places a limit on what can be said nationally. Ninety-seven surface-water sites are a small fraction of Scotland's complete water environment. The locations were selected for a scoping programme, not to produce a national prevalence estimate. PFAS detection does not establish a regulatory breach, and environmental detection does not establish exposure through drinking water.

What the programme now provides is a baseline that did not previously exist at this scale.

SEPA found PFAS at just under 90 per cent of the surface-water sites and around 60 per cent of the groundwater sites it examined in 2025. It found no sample exceeding the relevant environmental or groundwater standards. It also found a pattern in which higher concentrations tended to occur around locations with known or expected PFAS sources.

With the sampling programme increasing to approximately 500 tests in 2026, Scotland is moving from an initial map of where PFAS can be detected towards a larger record capable of showing whether those patterns persist, where further investigation is required and how concentrations change over time.

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INFRASTRUCTURE | 23 September 2026

Accessible Trains, Inaccessible Stations

Read online: <https://modern.scot/accessible-trains-inaccessible-stations-most-of-scotlands-railway-stations-were-not-fully-step-free-in-the-last-national-count/>



Scotland says disabled people should be able to travel with the same freedom, choice, dignity and opportunity as everyone else. Its trains now meet modern accessibility standards. But the last national count found that 227 of 360 railway stations did not provide unrestricted step-free access to every platform, and the major UK programme funding station accessibility is now operating with less money than in the previous five-year period.

A modern ScotRail train can arrive carrying wheelchair

spaces, audible and visual passenger information and emergency call-for-aid equipment, all built to accessibility standards intended to allow disabled passengers to travel.

But for some passengers, the difficulty begins before they can reach that train.

The most recent national assessment of Scotland's stations found that only 133 of 360 — 37 per cent — provided step-free access to every platform. Another 184 offered some degree of step-free access, while 43 had no step-free route to any platform at all.

That meant 227 stations, 63 per cent of the network examined, did not provide unrestricted step-free access to every platform.

For a passenger who can use stairs, that may be little more than a statistic about old railway architecture. For someone who cannot, it can decide whether a train shown on the timetable is actually a train they can catch.

A wheelchair user, a passenger who cannot safely manage stairs, or somebody whose mobility makes a long or steep route difficult may have to know considerably more about the railway before leaving home. They may need to establish which platform their train normally uses, whether that platform can be reached without stairs, whether a lift is available and working, whether a ramp will be provided, whether staff will be present and what happens if disruption suddenly sends the train from another platform.

The train can be accessible while the journey is not.

The Trains Have Been Made Accessible. The Stations Have Not.

There is an important difference between the accessibility of Scotland's trains and the accessibility of the infrastructure around them.

Transport Scotland says the entire Scottish rail fleet now complies with the Persons with Reduced Mobility National Technical Specification Notice. Every train provides two dedicated wheelchair spaces, audible and visual passenger information and on-board call-for-aid systems.

The position at stations is markedly different.

The national station figure still cited in 2026 comes from Transport Scotland analysis undertaken in 2020 for the second Strategic Transport Projects Review. Of 360 stations examined, 133 were classified as providing step-free access to all platforms. A further 184 had only some degree of step-free access. Forty-three had none.

There has been progress since then. Stations have been rebuilt, six received improvements through the principal Access for All programme during the following control period, and new fully accessible stations have opened at places including Leven and Cameron Bridge.

But Scotland has not published a replacement national percentage in the sources examined by Modern Scot, even though current station-by-station information now exists.

The result is that the national accessibility figure still being used to describe Scotland's railway is six years old.

What “Some Step-Free Access” Can Actually Mean

The railway's accessibility classifications explain why simply combining fully and partly accessible stations would give a misleading impression of the network available to disabled passengers.

A Category A station provides step-free access to all platforms while trains are running, using level access, lifts or compliant ramps.

Category B is much broader. A station can fall within it while containing long or steep ramps, lengthy street-level routes between platforms, difficult surfaces or access to only some of its platforms. The Office of Rail and Road's classification guidance explicitly recognises that major barriers within this category may restrict some disabled and older people from using the station.

Category B3 is clearer still: step-free access exists to fewer than the total number of platforms.

A passenger may therefore be able to reach the platform for an outward train but not the platform required to return. A planned journey can become inaccessible if a service is moved from one platform to another. An interchange that appears straightforward on a timetable can require a route outside the station that is much longer than the route available to passengers using stairs.

Current ScotRail records show how varied those barriers remain.

At Achnasheen, the January 2026 station accessibility document records level access to platform one but a connecting footbridge with stairs to platform two. Achnashellach is described as having a low platform, rough ground and access through a cattle gate. Altnabreac is recorded with rough ground and a low platform. Aberdour has level access to one platform and a steep ramp to the other, with stairs on the connecting footbridge.

These are not identical barriers and they will not affect every disabled passenger in the same way. But a description such as “some step-free access” can conceal a journey that requires considerably more planning than the phrase suggests.

Some Stations Still Have No Step-Free Access at All

ScotRail's January 2026 accessibility information continues to identify stations in Category C, meaning

there is no step-free access to any platform.

Alexandra Parade in Glasgow is recorded as requiring stairs to both platforms. Argyle Street is recorded as requiring escalators and stairs to reach its below-ground island platform. Ardlui and Arrochar & Tarbet require stairs to island platforms. Attadale requires stairs to its single platform. Garelochhead, Garscadden, Gilshochill and a number of south Glasgow stations also remain in Category C in the current document.

The existence of these stations does not mean the railway simply abandons passengers who cannot use them. ScotRail operates assistance arrangements and, where a station is inaccessible to a passenger, says it will arrange an appropriate taxi at no additional charge between that station and the nearest or most convenient accessible station for the journey.

That is an important safeguard.

It also demonstrates the underlying physical problem. One passenger arrives at the station and boards the train. Another passenger holding a ticket for the same railway journey may have to be driven by road to a different station before being able to use the railway.

The destination may eventually be reached. The journey is not the same.

The Difference Shows Up in How Much Disabled People Travel

Transport Scotland's own statistics show a large gap in rail use.

In 2024, 17 per cent of disabled adults said they had used a local train during the previous month. Among non-disabled adults, the figure was 35 per cent.

Among people whose disability limited their everyday activities "a lot", only 11 per cent had used a train during the combined 2022–24 period. For those whose activities were limited "a little", the proportion was 22 per cent.

Station accessibility cannot be presented as the sole cause of those differences. Disabled and non-disabled populations also differ by age, employment, income, geography, access to cars, health and the journeys they need to make.

But physical access exists within a wider documented mobility gap. Transport Scotland also records fewer journeys overall among disabled adults and lower feelings of safety on public transport. In 2024, 63 per cent of disabled people said they felt safe and secure travelling by train in the evening, compared with 81 per cent of non-disabled people.

The railway is therefore being used less by the population for whom barriers in stations, information, assistance and the wider journey can carry the greatest consequences.

Scotland Set Its Own Standard Ten Years Ago

Scotland did not wait until 2026 to recognise this problem.

Its first national Accessible Travel Framework was published in September 2016 following work with disabled people, their representatives and transport organisations.

The vision was unusually clear: "All disabled people can travel with the same freedom, choice, dignity and opportunity as other citizens."

The framework described travel as part of something larger than transport. Being able to move around determines access to employment, education, healthcare, social life, culture and other parts of ordinary citizenship.

It also explicitly described its purpose as removing disabling barriers rather than asking disabled people continually to adapt themselves to an inaccessible system.

The framework was established for ten years. It reaches the end of that period in 2026.

Transport Scotland's final 2024–26 delivery plan acknowledges that work remains to be done and contains a dedicated workstream for developing a successor framework. It also calls for stronger baseline information and annual evidence capable of showing whether the mobility gap is actually narrowing.

The end of the ten-year framework therefore arrives with an uncomfortable measurement problem. The national figure still being quoted for full station step-free access comes from its fourth year, 2020, rather than its final year.

This Is About Independence, Not Special Treatment

Passenger assistance is an essential part of an accessible railway. Across Great Britain, operators recorded 1,914,172 pre-booked passenger assists during the year to March 2026 and another 1,491,588 requests made by passengers who arrived without advance booking.

The volume shows how important assistance is to ordinary rail operation.

But assistance and accessibility are not interchangeable.

A passenger who can independently reach a platform does not have to establish beforehand whether somebody will be available to help them get there. They do not have to consider whether a staff shortage changes the viability of the journey. They do not have to arrange a taxi because the railway station nearest their home cannot be used.

For many disabled passengers, the ability to travel can depend upon several systems working together: the physical station, information about accessibility, a functioning lift, staff, Passenger Assist, a boarding ramp and accessible infrastructure at the destination.

If one essential link fails, the journey can fail with it.

The Office of Rail and Road's Accessible Travel Policy guidance recognises this explicitly. Operators must have arrangements to provide alternative accessible transport without additional charge where a passenger cannot travel from a station because the station is inaccessible, or where disruption makes the railway inaccessible.

The regulator says operators should, where reasonably possible, provide an alternative that most closely resembles the service available to passengers who do not require assistance.

That requirement protects passengers when infrastructure fails to provide equal access. It does not make the infrastructure itself equally accessible.

Accessibility Is Not Merely a Customer-Service Aspiration

The issue also sits inside a legal framework.

Disability is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. Where a physical feature places disabled people at a substantial disadvantage compared with people who are not disabled, the Act contains a duty to take reasonable steps to avoid that disadvantage or, where appropriate, provide a reasonable alternative means of delivering the service.

Failure to comply with the reasonable-adjustment duty can amount to unlawful discrimination.

That does not mean that every station containing stairs is automatically unlawful. What constitutes a reasonable adjustment depends upon the circumstances, and Britain's railway includes old structures, constrained sites, listed buildings and locations where major engineering work is complex and expensive.

But the age of an asset does not remove disabled people from equality law.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission published new principles for accessible transport in March 2026. It said transport should be designed and consistently operated so disabled and older people have choice and control over how and when they travel, safely and with dignity. It also emphasised that service providers should anticipate disabled people's needs rather than waiting until an individual encounters a barrier.

That principle closely resembles the promise Scotland made for itself in 2016.

Scotland Has Changed Transport at National Scale Before

The physical rebuilding of old railway stations is expensive and technically different from changing fares or concessionary schemes. But Scotland's recent transport history demonstrates that government policy can change the way millions of journeys are made when a national priority is established.

Free bus travel for people under 22 has generated more than 289 million journeys since its introduction, according to Transport Scotland. The Scottish Government permanently removed peak fares from ScotRail in September 2025 and froze ScotRail fares for twelve months from April 2026. More than two million people are covered by Scotland's wider concessionary bus schemes.

Those policies address different problems and should not be treated as money that could simply have been transferred to station reconstruction. Rail infrastructure funding also crosses the boundary between devolved and reserved responsibilities.

They do demonstrate something more basic: accessibility, affordability and participation in transport are shaped by policy decisions as well as engineering constraints.

Step-free access is one of those decisions, even where the work required to provide it is difficult.

Responsibility Is Divided Between Governments

The institutional arrangements make railway accessibility unusually complicated.

Rail accessibility is reserved to the UK Government. The main Access for All programme is funded by the Department for Transport, which makes the final decisions about which stations receive money.

Transport Scotland and Scottish Ministers work with the Department for Transport to identify Scottish priorities. The Scottish Government can also include accessibility work within wider rail investments that it funds, and ScotRail itself is publicly owned by Scottish Ministers.

Network Rail owns and operates much of the infrastructure on which improvements have to be delivered.

Responsibility is therefore divided. The physical obstacle encountered by a passenger is not.

A person standing at the foot of a staircase cannot use one government's reserved powers to reach the platform and another government's devolved powers to descend at the destination. They encounter one railway journey.

Six Stations Were Improved in Five Years

There has been tangible investment.

Network Rail told the Scottish Parliament this month that six Scottish stations received step-free improvements through Access for All during Control Period 6, which ran to 2024.

They were Croy, Johnstone, Port Glasgow, Dumfries, Anniesland and Uddingston.

At Port Glasgow, a project costing about £5 million installed two lifts and a new footbridge, giving passengers step-free movement between the platforms. Other accessibility improvements have been incorporated into larger projects rather than funded separately through Access for All.

Transport Scotland says 31 Scottish stations had benefited from step-free access through Access for All by March 2024 over the longer life of the programme.

Those improvements have altered individual journeys. A station that previously prevented someone reaching the opposite platform can become a station they can use independently.

The difficulty is the scale and pace remaining.

The Current Major Programme Has Less Money

Network Rail Scotland route director Liam Sumpter gave MSPs a particularly important update on 16 September.

He said the Access for All programme has less funding during the current Control Period 7 than it had during the preceding five-year period.

At present, Bellgrove in Glasgow is the only Scottish station committed to receive the full Access for All treatment during CP7. Funding has also been provided for detailed design work at Falkirk Grahamston.

The position is narrower than the list announced by the UK Department for Transport in May 2024, when Bellgrove, Dumbarton Central, Falkirk Grahamston and Inverurie were among Scottish stations named for the next Access for All programme.

Being selected for programme development does not mean that full construction funding has been committed. Network Rail's September evidence provides the later account of what is presently expected to receive complete treatment within CP7.

A separate Railway for Everyone programme is intended to provide smaller accessibility interventions at other stations.

Those improvements may remove individual barriers, but they are not equivalent to providing a fully step-free route through a station.

The Railway Still Contains Two Different Experiences

The January 2026 ScotRail station document demonstrates both how far accessibility has moved and how incomplete it remains.

Aberdeen is Category A. Airdrie is Category A. Anniesland is now Category A. Arbroath is Category A. New stations at Leven and Cameron Bridge were built fully accessible.

At the same time, other stations remain accessible only through steep ramps, lengthy alternative routes or particular platforms, while some retain no step-free access at all.

For passengers unaffected by those barriers, the complexity can remain almost invisible.

They can decide to travel, buy a ticket and reasonably assume that a station marked on a railway map is available to them. If a platform changes, they walk to another platform. If a connecting train uses the opposite side of the station, they cross to it.

A disabled passenger may instead have to examine the architecture of the journey before deciding whether it can be made.

That difference reaches beyond railway engineering. It affects whether somebody can accept work involving travel, attend an appointment independently, visit family without arranging help, travel with friends, make an unplanned journey or arrive in an unfamiliar Scottish town without first studying whether the station itself will let them out.

A Six-Year-Old Figure at the End of a Ten-Year Promise

Scotland's last published national station calculation found that 63 per cent of the stations examined were not fully step-free.

That calculation is now six years old.

The railway has changed since then, meaning the precise percentage today may be better than it was in 2020. Six stations received full Access for All improvements in the following control period. Other projects have altered stations independently of that programme. New accessible stations have opened.

Current information for individual stations is already published by ScotRail and the Office of Rail and Road. What remains absent from the public record examined by Modern Scot is a new national calculation showing precisely how much of the Scottish network is now fully step-free.

That absence is particularly striking in 2026 because Scotland's ten-year Accessible Travel Framework is itself reaching its end.

The promise made in 2016 was not that disabled people would be provided with a special transport system. It was that they should be able to use transport with the same freedom, choice, dignity and opportunity as other citizens.

Scotland has now reached the final year of that promise with an accessible train fleet, continuing investment in selected stations and a successor accessibility framework under development.

It also retains stations where current passenger information still says there is no step-free access to any platform, others where only part of the station can be reached without stairs, and a major accessibility

programme which Network Rail says has less funding than it did during the previous five-year period.

The contradiction can be reduced to an ordinary journey.

The timetable can show the train. The train can meet the accessibility standard. A ticket can be valid for the service. Yet for a passenger standing on the wrong side of an inaccessible staircase, the railway can still be out of reach.

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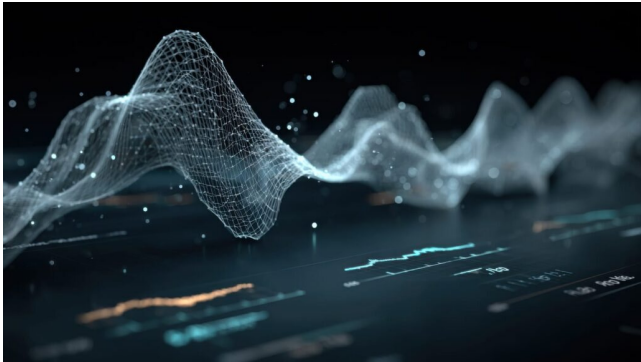
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ENERGY | 23 September 2026

About £104 Million of July's Grid Constraint Bill Was Assigned to Scotland. One Scottish Workaround Saved an Estimated £39 Million

Read online: <https://modern.scot/about-104-million-of-julys-grid-constraint-bill-was-assigned-to-scotland-one-scottish-workaround-saved-an-estimated-39-million/>



NESO spent £221.2 million managing electricity constraints across Great Britain in July. Its monthly analysis assigns 47 per cent of that cost to its Scotland category, while a changed operating arrangement at a Scottish 275kV substation increased a nearby transfer limit by about 500MW and produced an estimated £39 million saving in the same month.

A change in the way a single Scottish electricity

substation was operated saved an estimated £39 million in July, according to the National Energy System Operator, providing an unusually clear measure of how much Scotland's transmission bottlenecks can cost before a new power line has been built.

NESO's July balancing report records £302 million of total balancing costs across Great Britain during the month. Of that, £221.2 million was attributed to constraints: situations in which the electricity system could not simply move or use power in the pattern the market would otherwise produce.

NESO's accompanying chart assigns 47 per cent of July constraint costs to its "Constraints – Scotland" category. Applied to the £221.2 million monthly total, that represents approximately £104 million.

The figure is not a bill issued to Scotland, nor does it mean that Scottish consumers alone pay it. NESO operates the electricity system across Great Britain, and balancing costs are recovered through the wider electricity-market arrangements. The Scottish category identifies where a substantial part of the physical system restriction arose.

July also demonstrates that the size of the constraint problem is not fixed. A new running arrangement proposed at a 275kV substation in Scotland increased the transfer limit of a nearby thermal constraint by roughly 500 megawatts. NESO estimates that the single operational change avoided approximately £39 million of costs during the month.

The electricity exists. The network has to move it.

Scotland's transmission problem is increasingly one of geography and capacity.

Large volumes of renewable generation are located in the north and east of the country, while much of Britain's demand lies farther south. Electricity does not move across the network without limits. Transmission circuits have maximum operating capabilities, and outages for maintenance or reinforcement can reduce them further.

When the amount of electricity seeking to cross a constrained part of the network exceeds the secure

transfer capability, NESO has to intervene. Generation on one side may be reduced while generation or other services on the other side are increased. Those actions carry costs.

The Scottish transmission network is divided by NESO into seven principal boundaries running from the far north through the central belt and ultimately across the Anglo-Scottish connection.

At the Upper North boundary, B0, capability is currently limited to 1.1GW by the Shin–Beaully 132kV circuit. B1a, covering north-west transmission, is limited to 2GW by the Kintore–Tealing 275kV circuit. B2 is limited to 2.8GW by Killin–Errochty. Farther south, B4 is limited to 4GW by Tealing–Westfield, B5 to 3.9GW by Denny North–Lambhill, and B6, the main Scotland-to-England boundary, to 6.7GW by the Harker–Moffat 400kV circuit.

These figures are not the amount of renewable generation installed behind each boundary. They are the present transfer capabilities identified by NESO for the relevant network sections. The difference between generation behind a boundary and the amount that can securely cross it is central to the constraint problem.

A system being built while it is running

NESO expects the pressure to increase as further generation connects.

Under its Holistic Transition pathway, one of the future-energy scenarios used for network planning, Scotland could have around 38GW of generation capacity against gross demand of approximately 6GW by 2030. That is a scenario rather than a prediction of a single certain future, but it illustrates the scale of the potential export requirement.

NESO says offshore wind is the principal driver of the rapid increase in north-to-south transmission requirements. It expects higher transfers across the Scottish boundaries and is planning reinforcement accordingly.

Building the reinforcements can temporarily add another complication. Major transmission works require existing equipment to be taken out of service at times. NESO specifically warns that work around the B4 boundary may itself produce significant constraint costs while assets are unavailable for construction and reinforcement.

That creates a difficult operational sequence. The network needs additional capacity because more generation is connecting, but providing that capacity can require outages on parts of the network that are already heavily used.

July's wind and constraint numbers

Wind generation across Great Britain produced 4TWh in July, down from 4.6TWh in June. Scottish wind output fell from 1.7TWh to 1.5TWh.

Across Britain, 614GWh of wind was curtailed during July. That was lower than June's 710GWh but, according to NESO, remained the highest July curtailment volume in the previous five Julys it examined. The 614GWh figure is a Great Britain total and should not be treated as Scottish curtailment alone.

The most difficult day was 2 July. NESO recorded 122GWh of wind curtailment and £25.6 million of balancing costs. Around 95 per cent of that day's cost came from constraint management, and 97 per cent of the constraint element was associated with thermal constraints. NESO said exceptionally high wind levels coincided with outages that reduced southbound transfer capability.

For July as a whole, thermal constraint system costs reached £167.8 million. That was £13.8 million below June but £75.6 million higher than in July 2025.

The figures also show why constraint costs cannot be read solely as a measure of how much wind was curtailed. Wholesale electricity prices, network outages, the location and price of alternative generation, voltage requirements, inertia and the precise configuration of the network all affect the final balancing bill.

The £39 million change

Against those large system costs, NESO's account of the Scottish 275kV substation is unusually specific.

The operator said outage-optimisation measures produced approximately £105 million of savings across Britain during July. The most valuable individual action was the new Scottish substation running arrangement. By increasing the transfer limit of a nearby thermal constraint by roughly 500MW, NESO estimates it saved approximately £39 million.

No new transmission corridor had to be completed to obtain that saving. It came from changing the usable capability of the existing system.

That does not remove the need for major reinforcement. The underlying Scottish boundaries remain constrained and additional generation is expected to increase transfer requirements. It does demonstrate the financial scale of relatively small changes in available network capacity when the system is operating close to a boundary limit.

NESO is developing further non-build measures alongside physical reinforcement. Its Scottish Constraint Management Intertrip Service is intended to contract with generators so that output can be rapidly disconnected following particular faults, allowing the network to carry more power securely before the fault occurs. Delivery is planned from the fourth quarter of 2027.

The system operator is also developing arrangements intended to increase electricity demand close to constrained parts of the network at times when generation is abundant, rather than reducing generation solely because the power cannot be transported farther south.

The July report places those future mechanisms against a current financial baseline. Great Britain incurred £221.2 million of constraint costs in one month; NESO assigned 47 per cent of the total to its Scotland category. In the same month, approximately 500MW of additional usable transfer capability around one Scottish substation was worth an estimated £39 million in avoided costs.

As the next wave of Scottish generation seeks connection, the condition and operating capability of the wires between the turbines and the eventual demand are becoming measurable in hundreds of millions of pounds as well as megawatts.

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ENERGY | 23 September 2026

ScotWind's Scottish Commitments Rise to £25.6 Billion as Scotland's Share of Project Spend Falls to 29%

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotwinds-scottish-commitments-rise-to-25-6-billion-as-scotlands-share-of-project-spend-falls-to-29/>



The latest figures for 16 ScotWind projects show more money projected for the Scottish supply chain than three years ago, but total project expenditure has grown much faster. Manufacturing and fabrication account for only 20 per cent of the commitments allocated to Scotland, while the Scottish Government says existing employment statistics cannot identify the number of supply-chain jobs created directly by ScotWind.

Scotland's projected share of expenditure from 16 ScotWind developments has fallen from 36 per cent to 29 per cent since 2023, even as the amount developers commit to spending in Scotland has increased.

The change is recorded in the latest Supply Chain Development Statement updates submitted by ScotWind developers to Crown Estate Scotland and in subsequent Scottish Government answers to Parliament. The 16 projects now carry total reported project expenditure of £88.6 billion, an increase of £23.4 billion from the equivalent 2023 position. Within that total, projected Scottish supply-chain expenditure has risen by about £2.3 billion, from £23.3 billion to £25.6 billion.

The two numbers have therefore moved in the same direction but at markedly different speeds. Scotland is projected to receive more expenditure in cash terms, while receiving a smaller proportion of a considerably larger project bill.

Crown Estate Scotland's own July announcement puts the Scottish commitment at £25.5 billion rather than the £25.6 billion subsequently used by the Scottish Government in parliamentary answers. The difference is small and appears within the presentation and rounding of the latest dataset, but the Government's £25.6 billion and £88.6 billion figures are the basis for its stated 29 per cent share.

Where the Scottish share is concentrated

The aggregate figure also conceals large differences between the stages of an offshore wind project. In an August parliamentary answer, the Scottish Government said the latest statements allocate 62 per cent of development commitments to Scotland and 70 per cent of operations commitments. Installation stands at 36 per cent.

Manufacturing and fabrication stands at 20 per cent.

That category covers the industrial portion of offshore wind development in which much of the competition for long-term supply-chain capacity is concentrated: the manufacture and fabrication of structures and components required to build projects rather than the professional, consenting and operational activity

around them. The figures do not establish where individual contracts will ultimately be placed, but they show the geographical allocation developers are currently prepared to enter as commitments in their ScotWind statements.

The Scottish Government has pointed to a further £10.5 billion of possible Scottish manufacturing expenditure contained in developers' higher "ambition" figures. Those figures are not the same as commitments. Crown Estate Scotland's own SCDS rules describe an ambition as expenditure that could be achieved if assumptions made by a developer are met, while a commitment is the figure against which the project's contracted position is ultimately tested.

Keeping those categories separate is particularly important while most ScotWind projects remain in development. Crown Estate Scotland said in July that only one of the projects covered by the leasing round, West of Orkney, had secured the relevant consent at that point, while 14 applications were being progressed by the Scottish Government's Marine Directorate as of 1 June.

What a ScotWind commitment actually binds

The Supply Chain Development Statement system is more substantial than a voluntary forecast, but it is not a record of expenditure already made.

Each project divides intended expenditure across four stages — development, manufacturing and fabrication, installation and operations — and four geographical areas: Scotland, the rest of the UK, the European Union and elsewhere. Developers can update the figures as projects mature, subject to Crown Estate Scotland accepting the update.

The contractual test comes later.

Before a developer can move from its option agreement to request a full seabed lease, it must submit a Contracted Position Statement. That statement records expenditure already incurred and future expenditure supported by finalised or well-advanced contracts. Crown Estate Scotland then compares that contracted position with the project's current Supply Chain Development Statement.

The mechanism contains 16 separate tests, reflecting the four project stages across the four geographical areas. Crown Estate Scotland applies what it calls the Lowest Percentage Achievement test. If the lowest-performing category reaches at least 90 per cent but less than the full commitment, the payment is £50,000. Between 50 and 90 per cent it is £100,000. Between 25 and 50 per cent it is £250,000.

If the lowest-performing category falls below 25 per cent, the developer may not request the lease.

The £250,000 figure should therefore not be treated as the maximum consequence for severe under-delivery. At the bottom of the scale, access to the seabed lease required to build and operate the project is at stake.

The mechanism also has limits. Crown Estate Scotland confirmed in a February 2025 freedom-of-information response that the ScotWind SCDS does not require information on domestic content, job creation, pay and conditions or trade-union recognition. Its formal purpose is to collect anticipated supply-chain expenditure by project stage and geography.

The job number that cannot yet be separated

The absence of a job requirement has become more significant as ScotWind has moved from leasing announcements towards industrial delivery.

Asked in August for the latest estimate of the number of jobs created in Scotland's supply chain as a direct result of ScotWind, the Scottish Government did not provide such a figure. Instead it cited Scotland's Marine Economy Statistics, which estimated 4,400 people were directly employed by the Scottish offshore wind sector in 2023, compared with 3,900 in 2022.

The Government explicitly stated that those figures do not include a count of supply-chain jobs created directly as a result of ScotWind.

It also cited forward-looking estimates for the much wider offshore wind pipeline, including ScotWind, INTOG and test and demonstration projects. Those are scenario estimates of possible future employment and cannot establish how many ScotWind supply-chain jobs exist now.

The result is an unusual evidential position. Scotland now has increasingly detailed figures for where tens of billions of pounds of future ScotWind expenditure are committed by geography and project phase, but no corresponding official count isolating the supply-chain employment already created directly by the leasing programme.

A moving portfolio

The latest £25.5 billion to £25.6 billion Scottish figure also does not cover exactly the same portfolio as the headline numbers published when ScotWind was expanded to 20 projects.

The 2026 update covers 16 projects. Three projects awarded through the later ScotWind clearing process are due to provide their updates in autumn 2026. A twentieth project, ChampionWind, had its option agreement terminated by Shell in late 2025.

That makes direct comparison with the earlier £28.8 billion of initial Scottish commitments across all 20 projects unsafe without adjusting for the different project set. The cleaner comparison is the one used by the Scottish Government: the same 16 projects in 2023 and 2026.

For those projects, the direction is now established. Scottish expenditure commitments rose by about £2.3 billion. Total expected project expenditure rose by £23.4 billion. The Scottish proportion consequently moved from 36 per cent to 29 per cent, while the latest stage-by-stage breakdown places one fifth of manufacturing and fabrication commitments in Scotland.

The next records will sharpen that picture. The three clearing projects are due to update their statements in autumn. As individual developments approach major contracting and lease decisions, their Contracted Position Statements will begin converting projected commitments into a record that can be compared with expenditure incurred and contracts actually secured.

Until then, £25.6 billion remains a commitment about where future expenditure is expected to fall, rather than an account of £25.6 billion already delivered into the Scottish economy.

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ENVIRONMENT | 23 September 2026

Scientists Will Search for the Peat Moss That Survives Drought

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scientists-will-search-for-the-peat-moss-that-survives-drought/>



A new £2.7 million research programme led from Scotland will search wild Sphagnum populations across Britain and Ireland for mosses that already cope unusually well with drought, then investigate the genetics, physical structure and even airborne chemical signals behind their survival. The work could eventually influence how degraded peatlands are restored as Scotland moves towards a target of more than 400,000 hectares of restoration by 2040.

Scientists are preparing to search peatlands across Britain and Ireland for populations of Sphagnum moss that appear naturally better equipped to survive drought, in an attempt to identify biological traits that could eventually be used to make peatland restoration more resilient to a drying climate.

The two-year project, called FutureMoss, will be led by the James Hutton Institute and has been awarded £2.7 million through the Advanced Research and Invention Agency. About £2 million of the funding will go to the Hutton, with researchers from the University of the Highlands and Islands, the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology and the University of Dundee also participating.

Rather than beginning with a laboratory-designed moss, the researchers intend first to look for adaptation that has already occurred in nature. Local Sphagnum populations will be examined for differences in their ability to withstand dry conditions and recover afterwards. The team will then investigate the genetic and biological characteristics associated with those differences and attempt to develop new drought-tolerant material through controlled breeding.

The work moves peatland restoration into an unusual area of climate adaptation. Restoration has traditionally concentrated heavily on repairing the conditions around damaged peat: blocking drains, raising water tables, reprofiling eroded ground, stabilising exposed surfaces and allowing characteristic bog vegetation to return. FutureMoss asks an additional question. If the climate into which a bog is being restored is becoming more prone to drought, are some populations of one of its most important plants inherently better prepared for those conditions than others?

A Small Plant With an Outsized Role

Sphagnum is not simply vegetation growing on top of a peat bog. In many northern peatlands it is one of the organisms responsible for creating and maintaining the conditions from which peat develops.

The moss grows as a dense carpet at the surface. Beneath the living layer, partially decomposed plant material accumulates in wet, oxygen-poor conditions. Over long periods that accumulation forms peat and stores carbon that would otherwise return more readily to the atmosphere.

Sphagnum is particularly effective at retaining water. Unlike vascular plants, it does not depend upon a

system of true roots to draw water from the soil, and its dominant leafy stage does not regulate water loss through the leaf stomata familiar in higher plants. Its architecture instead allows water to be retained within specialised cells and, importantly, in the tiny spaces throughout the moss carpet.

Research into Sphagnum water relations has found that most of the water in a moss carpet is held outside the living cells, within the pore spaces created by its leaves and branches. Large specialised hyaline cells provide an additional reservoir, holding water particularly tightly as the moss begins to dry.

That ability helps Sphagnum maintain the wet conditions on which the wider bog depends. It does not, however, make the moss immune to prolonged drought.

Different Mosses Fail at Different Points

The scientific basis for looking for unusually resilient Sphagnum has strengthened considerably in recent years.

A 2025 laboratory study of two Sphagnum species found sharply different moisture thresholds below which damage to photosynthesis became irreversible. In Sphagnum palustre, the threshold was approximately 12 grams of water for every gram of dry biomass. In Sphagnum squarrosum, it was about 18 grams per gram. The first species retained moisture more effectively and endured drought for longer before passing its critical threshold.

The experiment did not establish that those particular species are the answer for Scottish restoration sites. It demonstrated something more fundamental to the FutureMoss proposition: different Sphagnum can respond very differently to the same process of drying, and there are biological limits beyond which simply rewetting the moss does not immediately restore normal functioning.

A broader scientific review published in New Phytologist the same year found that drought responses operate at several levels, from individual cells and plant structure through to whole Sphagnum communities. Drought can affect photosynthesis, growth, respiration, methane exchange and the hydrology of the surrounding peatland. Species identity, position relative to the water table and the physical structure of the moss can all alter the response.

FutureMoss will move the investigation further into variation within and between natural populations. Researchers intend to find local populations that show stronger drought resistance or a better capacity to recover, then examine what is responsible.

That could involve characteristics visible in the plant's structure, differences in physiology and differences written into its genome.

The Moss May Also Give Away Its Condition Through the Air

One of the less obvious parts of the project involves what Sphagnum releases into the atmosphere.

Researchers from the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology will examine chemical signals produced by the moss during drought, looking for patterns that could help identify varieties particularly capable of tolerating water stress.

Mosses release small quantities of biogenic volatile organic compounds into the air. Previous research on Sphagnum has identified compounds including isoprene, monoterpenes and sesquiterpenes, among others. Their emissions can change as the plant is placed under environmental stress.

In one experiment published in 2024, researchers subjected Sphagnum material from boreal peatlands to a 43-day drought. Total volatile emissions and isoprene emissions fell during the drought. Other compounds responded differently, and some effects persisted after the moss was rewetted. Sesquiterpene emissions remained depressed six weeks into the recovery period.

FutureMoss will examine whether chemical changes of this kind can serve as useful indicators when researchers compare populations. If particular chemical signatures reliably accompany resistance or recovery, they could give the project another means of identifying promising moss without relying on appearance alone.

Finding the Survivors, Then Trying to Combine Their Traits

The next stage is more experimental.

The Hutton says FutureMoss will develop methods to produce new drought-tolerant Sphagnum varieties and intends to establish controlled breeding, which it describes as a first for Sphagnum.

That claim requires some qualification. Earlier German research programmes have explicitly described work on the breeding of peat moss. A project running from 2017 into the early 2020s collected wild Sphagnum material from multiple European populations, genetically characterised it, selected highly productive material and carried out what the researchers called “Smart Sphagnum Breeding”. Related work included production of polyploid cultivars and field testing of selected and bred lines for Sphagnum farming.

That earlier work was directed principally towards improving productivity and mass cultivation of peat moss as a renewable horticultural material, rather than FutureMoss's stated objective of producing climate-resilient material for ecological function and restoration. The public description of FutureMoss does not yet explain precisely how its proposed controlled-breeding method differs technically from the earlier European work. The claim of a first therefore remains the Hutton's description rather than an independently established historical first.

The more consequential aspect of FutureMoss is its target trait. The project is attempting to take naturally occurring differences in drought performance, identify the mechanisms behind them and determine whether useful characteristics can be combined or developed deliberately.

Nothing in the material published about FutureMoss says that the project will genetically engineer Sphagnum. It sits within a much wider ARIA research programme that includes projects using advanced biotechnology in other species, but the publicly stated FutureMoss approach centres on natural variation, genetics, biological traits and controlled breeding.

Nor are experimental mosses about to be planted across Scottish bogs. ARIA requires research under its Accelerated Adaptation programme to take place in contained settings during the programme period and says there will be no releases into wild populations while that funding is under way.

Why Drought Has Become a Restoration Problem

The timing of the project coincides with a substantial expansion of peatland restoration in Scotland.

Scotland contains about two million hectares of peatland, roughly a quarter of the country's land surface and a large proportion of the UK's total peat resource. Between 2012 and March 2026, Peatland ACTION and other funding streams delivered restoration interventions across approximately 105,000 hectares.

The Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan, published in March, now sets an ambition to increase annual peatland restoration by 10 per cent each year to 2030, maintain the resulting rate afterwards and take cumulative restoration beyond 400,000 hectares by 2040.

That expansion makes the long-term condition of restored sites increasingly significant. The success of restoration cannot be measured simply by the completion of engineering work or the number of hectares treated. A damaged bog can be rewetted comparatively quickly; rebuilding the ecological processes of a functioning peatland can take considerably longer.

A 2026 NatureScot review of evidence from restored peatlands found that recovery of some of the feedback mechanisms that give near-natural bogs their resilience may take more than a decade. During earlier stages of recovery, restored sites can remain vulnerable to extreme drought.

The review found evidence from England and Ireland that restored plots containing Sphagnum were better able to maintain important peatland functions during drought than comparable areas without a Sphagnum layer. It also found that the legacy of previous drainage, forestry and other land uses can continue to influence how a restored bog responds years after physical restoration work has taken place.

NatureScot identified unanswered questions about the effect of repeated droughts and about whether the timing of drought relative to the restoration process changes a site's eventual success.

This creates a complication for a restoration programme operating over several decades. The climate experienced by a restored peatland in 2040 will not necessarily resemble that under which the surviving fragments of its original vegetation developed.

Scotland's Restoration Target Is Moving Into a Different Climate

The Scottish Government's current climate plan recognises peatland restoration primarily as a means of reducing greenhouse-gas emissions from damaged peat, but also identifies healthy peatlands as part of Scotland's adaptation to changing weather. Wet peatlands can retain water, influence flows during drought and heavy rainfall, support specialised wildlife and reduce the exposure of dry organic soils to severe fire.

The vulnerability works in both directions. Restoration can improve resilience to drought, but drought can also interfere with restoration before those protective characteristics have fully returned.

That is where Sphagnum becomes more than an indicator that restoration is progressing. A sufficiently established moss layer can influence the water balance and physical behaviour of the peat surface itself.

NatureScot's evidence review records Scottish work on what peatland researchers call “bog breathing”: the movement of the peat surface as water levels change. During drought, a functioning peat surface can partially collapse downwards as the water table falls, helping the upper layers remain in contact with moisture rather than being left suspended above it. Research in Scotland has linked that behaviour with the ability of near-natural peatlands to retain moisture and recover from dry periods.

Sphagnum is part of the living surface through which those hydrological and ecological feedbacks develop. The question facing FutureMoss is whether the biological material used to rebuild that surface can itself be made more capable of enduring the climatic conditions expected during its recovery.

Two Years to Test the Idea

FutureMoss remains an experiment rather than a new restoration prescription.

The project has two years to locate useful natural variation, determine which characteristics are associated with drought resistance and recovery, examine genetic and chemical markers, and develop methods for producing new material. Any eventual use on restoration sites would require further evidence beyond the contained research now being funded.

There are also ecological questions that extend beyond whether a moss survives a dry spell. Sphagnum species occupy different niches within a bog. A species suited to a wet pool is not interchangeable with one adapted to the raised surface of a hummock, and NatureScot's restoration guidance already cautions against planting Sphagnum outside the conditions to which the species is suited.

Local genetic suitability is another consideration. Existing restoration projects have often sought to use locally sourced or appropriate material rather than treating Sphagnum as a single uniform plant. Selecting one characteristic, such as drought tolerance, would therefore have to be considered alongside the wider ecological role and genetic diversity of the moss being restored.

ARIA's wider Accelerated Adaptation programme has been established specifically to test questions of that kind. Alongside projects aimed at accelerating adaptation in trees, pollinators, amphibians and other organisms, it includes separate work on modelling, independent validation, ethics and governance. The agency says interventions in wild populations require consideration not only of whether something can be done technically, but of its ecological and social consequences.

For FutureMoss, the starting material will come from nature itself. Somewhere among Sphagnum populations already growing across Britain and Ireland, the researchers expect to find mosses that respond to drought differently from their neighbours.

The first task is to find them. The next is to establish why they survive. Only after that will the project be able to determine whether the characteristics carried by those plants can be turned into something useful for the peatlands being restored into Scotland's changing climate.

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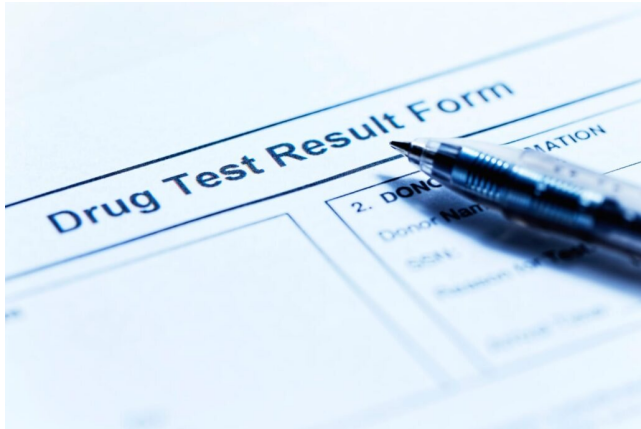
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Scotland's First Drug-Checking Service Opens in Glasgow — But Home Office Licence Restricts Who Can Use It

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-first-drug-checking-service-opens-in-glasgow-but-home-office-licence-restricts-who-can-use-it/>



Scotland's first local drug-checking service will open in Glasgow on 5 October, allowing people to submit illicit drugs for rapid analysis and receive information about what they contain. But access will not be open to everyone: Home Office licence conditions restrict the service to adults who are dependent on one or more illicit drugs.

Scotland's first local drug-checking service will open next month at Hunter Street in Glasgow, adding chemical analysis of street drugs to a site that already

houses some of the country's most closely watched harm-reduction services.

From Monday 5 October, people admitted to the service will be able to hand over a drug sample for rapid checking and receive information about what has been detected, alongside advice intended to reduce the risks associated with taking it.

The principle is straightforward. A person may believe that a substance is heroin, a benzodiazepine or another drug, but the illicit market provides no reliable label showing what is actually in it, how strong it is or whether another substance has been added. Drug checking attempts to replace some of that uncertainty with chemical evidence.

The Glasgow service will not, however, be available to everyone who uses illegal drugs.

Under the conditions attached to the Home Office licence, Scottish drug-checking services will be restricted to people aged over 18 who are dependent on one or more illicit drugs.

That creates a defined boundary around Scotland's first service. An adult with drug dependence can potentially use it. Someone using an illicit substance recreationally or intermittently, without meeting the service's dependence requirement, falls outside the group specified by the licence.

The restriction is particularly significant because drug checking performs two different jobs.

For the individual, it can provide information about a substance before further use. For the wider public-health system, every sample can become another piece of evidence about what is circulating in the illegal drug market.

Samples initially examined in Glasgow will also be sent to a new National Testing and Research Laboratory at the University of Dundee, where more detailed analysis can be carried out. Information from that laboratory will feed into Scotland's drug surveillance and early-warning system, helping health services identify

emerging substances and changes in the composition of the illicit supply.

The laboratory is based at the University of Dundee's Leverhulme Research Centre for Forensic Science. It has been developed to support local drug-checking facilities planned for Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen and Edinburgh.

The Scottish Government has committed more than £1.7 million to the pilot programme.

Glasgow will be first to open. Aberdeen and Dundee have now also received the Home Office licences required for their services, with preparations continuing for both. Edinburgh is working towards its own licence application.

The Glasgow service will operate at 55 Hunter Street, alongside but legally separate from The Thistle, Glasgow's safer drug consumption facility.

The Thistle allows people to consume drugs they already possess under clinical supervision. The drug-checking service will analyse samples and provide information about their contents. Although both operate from the same Hunter Street health and social care site, they are separate services operating under different legal arrangements.

The need for a Home Office licence arises because possession and supply of controlled drugs remain governed principally by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and related regulations, matters reserved to Westminster.

That has shaped the development of the Scottish project from the beginning.

A two-year Scottish Drug Checking Project, led by the University of Stirling and funded through the Drug Deaths Taskforce, was completed in May 2023. Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen were subsequently identified for the first local facilities.

The work then moved from research into implementation: designing procedures, deciding how samples could legally be transported, choosing equipment and preparing controlled-drug licence applications.

Dundee and Aberdeen submitted applications to the Home Office in March 2024. Glasgow followed that summer.

The Glasgow licence was approved in October 2025.

The first service will therefore open more than three years after the underlying Scottish research project moved towards practical implementation.

During that period, the composition of Scotland's illicit drug supply has continued to change.

Public Health Scotland's RADAR system has repeatedly warned about substances appearing in drugs sold as something else. Nitazene-type synthetic opioids have been detected in drug-related harms and deaths, including in substances believed by users to be heroin or benzodiazepines.

More recently, Public Health Scotland has reported the emergence of medetomidine, a potent veterinary sedative related to xylazine, in drugs sold as heroin and benzodiazepines.

The significance is not simply that new drugs are appearing. People may consume them without knowing they are present.

Public Health Scotland reported that nitazenes were found in 12 per cent of post-mortem toxicology samples

testing positive for a controlled drug between April and June 2025. Its later surveillance has continued to describe the illegal opioid and depressant markets as volatile, with substances changing as international controls and supply routes change.

Scotland's new testing network is intended to create another source of intelligence closer to the point at which drugs are actually being used.

A substance handed into Hunter Street may first produce information for the person who submitted it. More extensive testing in Dundee can then help identify wider patterns, including unexpected compounds, adulterants and emerging synthetic drugs.

That information can feed into RADAR, the national Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response system used to monitor changes in drugs, harms and health-service activity.

In that sense, the new service sits somewhere between a clinical intervention and a surveillance network.

Internationally, drug checking is not a single standardised service. The European Union Drugs Agency records services operating from permanent community sites, laboratories, festivals and drug consumption facilities across a number of European countries. The technology ranges from relatively simple tests capable of identifying particular substances to more advanced laboratory systems capable of analysing composition and strength.

The European agency says drug-checking information has become useful for monitoring drug-market changes and feeding early-warning systems, while evidence about its effect on individual risk-taking remains more limited.

A systematic review of 90 studies published in the journal *Addiction* reached a similar conclusion. Drug checking was well established as a means of monitoring unregulated drug markets, while studies also found changes in intended or actual behaviour particularly when testing revealed unexpected substances or drugs considered particularly dangerous.

Scotland's model is narrower at the front door than some drug-checking systems operating elsewhere.

European services include facilities aimed at recreational drug users and services operating at music festivals. Scotland's first licensed sites are instead being targeted, under Home Office criteria, at adults dependent on illicit drugs.

The Scottish Government's longer-term strategy is already looking beyond the initial fixed-site pilot.

Its 2026–35 Alcohol and Drugs Strategic Plan says the Government intends to explore wider access to drug checking, including possible mobile services and postal models, while the Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh pilots are evaluated.

Those ambitions would still have to operate within the legal framework governing controlled drugs.

The Scottish strategy explicitly acknowledges that several harm-reduction interventions used internationally remain restricted under the Misuse of Drugs Act and says ministers will continue discussing further measures with the UK Government.

The Glasgow service therefore represents both an expansion of Scottish drugs policy and an example of its constitutional limits.

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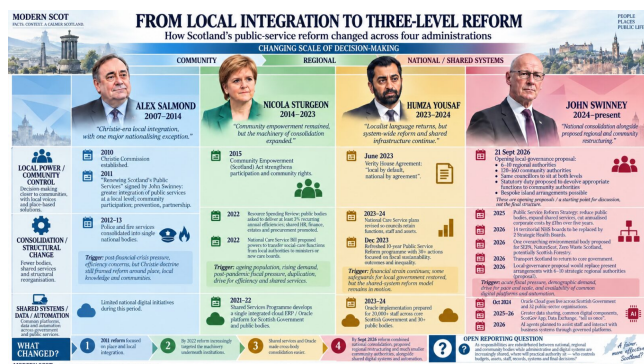
John Swinney Signed Scotland's Local-Integration Reform in 2011. Now He Is Redrawing the System

Read online: <https://modern.scot/john-swinney-signed-scotlands-local-integration-reform-in-2011-now-he-is-redrawing-the-system/>



Fifteen years after putting his name to a reform programme built around local integration, John Swinney leads plans for two strategic health boards, fewer national bodies, six to ten regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities.

The same politician who signed the Scottish Government's response to the Christie Commission, placing local integration, community participation and effective local delivery among the foundations of reform, now leads the most extensive proposed redrawing of Scotland's public administration since devolution. The Government has committed to replacing 14 territorial health boards with two strategic boards and reducing the number of national public bodies, while now proposing that existing local-government arrangements give way to between six and ten regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities. Behind those structural changes sit common corporate systems, wider data sharing, digital identity infrastructure and AI-assisted administration. The documentary record shows how Scotland's model of public-service reform changed across the Salmond, Sturgeon, Yousaf and Swinney administrations.



On 21 September 2026, the Scottish Government put its first detailed institutional shape around the local-government reforms announced three weeks earlier.

Its opening proposition is that Scotland's present local-government arrangements should be replaced by between six and ten regional authorities responsible for strategic decision-making and between 120 and 160 community authorities operating much closer to

individual towns, districts, neighbourhoods and islands.

The regional authorities could take enhanced responsibilities for economic development, housing, strategic planning, employability, transport and major public services. Community authorities could deal with functions including householder planning applications, licensing, community planning, historic environments, greenspace,

town-centre regeneration and local leisure, sport and cultural facilities.

The proposal does not envisage another set of elected politicians. Councillors would continue to be elected at the present ward level and would sit on both the relevant community authority and the associated regional authority. The Government proposes that the same regional administrative and corporate structures would support both.

It also says there should be a statutory obligation on regional authorities to devolve appropriate functions to community authorities. Island communities could receive separate Single Authority arrangements reflecting their particular circumstances.

None of that is settled. The paper describes itself as a starting point for discussion. Boundaries, final functions, statutory duties, funding arrangements, revenue-raising powers and the precise relationship between the three proposed levels — national, regional and community — remain to be determined.

The proposal nevertheless alters the picture of Scottish public-service reform considerably. The programme can no longer be described simply as a movement towards larger institutions. Its stated design now combines consolidation at national and regional level with a substantial new layer of decision-making below the scale of Scotland's existing 32 councils.

That development comes exactly 15 years after another Scottish Government reform document carrying John Swinney's name.

On 21 September 2011, Swinney signed the foreword to *Renewing Scotland's Public Services: Priorities for Reform in Response to the Christie Commission*, the Government's formal response to the Christie Commission. Alex Salmond was First Minister and Swinney was Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth.

The document set out four foundations for reform: a shift towards prevention; greater integration of public services at local level through partnership, collaboration and effective local delivery; greater investment in the public-service workforce; and a sharper focus on performance, transparency, innovation and digital technology.

Swinney's name, title and signature appeared beneath the foreword.

The emphasis on locality ran through the substance of the response. Effective locally integrated provision was described as crucial to improving outcomes, with partnership at local-authority level central to that work. Christie had argued that public services should be built around people and communities, drawing on local capacity while strengthening autonomy and resilience.

Place-based partnership and joint planning were presented as mechanisms through which better outcomes and more effective use of public resources could be achieved.

That emphasis on local decision-making also sat within the Salmond Government's wider constitutional argument for independence.

The 2013 independence white paper, *Scotland's Future*, argued that decisions about Scotland should be taken by the people who live in Scotland rather than at Westminster. It also said independence would provide an opportunity to entrench the position of local government in a written constitution and consider the appropriate responsibilities of councils and communities. Local authorities, it stated, were democratically accountable to their own electorates rather than to the Scottish Government.

Salmond made the relationship between national self-government and local subsidiarity more explicit in the Lerwick Declaration of July 2013. Responding to the campaign by Scotland's island councils for greater control, he said the principle of self-determination meant supporting subsidiarity and local decision-making.

The subsequent Empowering Scotland's Island Communities programme examined how Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles could obtain greater influence over economic, fiscal, environmental and resource questions in the event of independence.

The constitutional prospectus therefore operated at more than one level. It argued that powers exercised at Westminster should move to Scotland because decisions affecting Scotland were better made there. It also envisaged some powers being exercised closer to councils and communities.

That did not prevent the Salmond Government from creating large national institutions where ministers considered consolidation justified. Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service replaced eight regional police forces and eight regional fire and rescue services.

National consolidation and local integration therefore existed alongside one another from the beginning of the post-Christie period.

Fifteen years later, both elements remain, although the institutional scale has changed considerably.

On 1 September 2026, Swinney's Government committed itself to replacing Scotland's 14 territorial NHS boards with two strategic boards and reducing the number of special health boards. It also set out plans to bring SEPA, NatureScot and Zero Waste Scotland into a single overarching environmental organisation, potentially including Scottish Forestry; return Transport Scotland to core government; review other transport organisations for possible merger; examine consolidation of organisations managing public land; rationalise inspectorates; and review the remaining public-body landscape for efficiency, joint working or merger.

The programme extends beneath the names and boundaries of institutions. Corporate services are increasingly shared. Estates and procurement are being treated across organisational boundaries. Data is intended to move more readily between services. A "tell us once" model is being developed. Common digital services, data definitions, national platforms and automated systems form part of the same programme.

Scotland's emerging model is therefore no longer adequately described by a single centralisation-versus-localism axis. It is becoming a system in which the scale at which legal decisions are made can move in one direction while the administrative and technological infrastructure supporting those decisions moves in another.

Salmond: Reform Around Place

The starting point in 2011 was not a wholly decentralised model.

Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service demonstrated that the Salmond Government was prepared to replace multiple regional organisations with national ones where it believed a Scotland-wide structure would reduce duplication and improve delivery.

Even with those major exceptions, the language of the Christie response was heavily concerned with place.

Local services were expected to work together. Budgets could be planned jointly. Frontline workers and communities were treated as sources of knowledge about how services should be organised. Greater integration at local level was one of the four foundations of reform, with effective place-based partnership

identified as a means of improving outcomes and making better use of resources.

Financial pressure was already central to the debate. Christie was commissioned because increasing demand and constrained public expenditure were expected to make the existing system progressively more difficult to sustain.

The response adopted in 2011 was therefore a combination of prevention, local integration, collaboration and selected national consolidation rather than a single institutional model.

Sturgeon: The Administrative Direction Changes

Nicola Sturgeon became First Minister in November 2014.

The early part of her administration strengthened the localist side of the settlement through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. The legislation created stronger mechanisms for community bodies to participate in public decision-making and seek control of public assets.

Local empowerment therefore remained part of Scottish Government policy.

By the later Sturgeon period, however, a second form of reform was becoming increasingly prominent: consolidation not necessarily of the public bodies themselves, but of the machinery underneath them.

The 2022 Resource Spending Review required public bodies to plan for recurring annual efficiencies of at least 3 per cent and identified shared services, the public estate, procurement and grant management as areas in which savings should be pursued.

Bodies maintaining their own human-resources or finance functions were asked to consider whether corporate services could be shared. The estate programme envisaged fewer buildings, more co-location and greater interoperability across the public sector.

Christie had largely examined how separate organisations could work together around people and places. The newer programme increasingly examined why those organisations needed to maintain separate administrative machinery.

Human resources, finance, procurement, property and technology could be provided collectively even while organisations retained their individual legal identities.

The Resource Spending Review also placed digital infrastructure more firmly within the reform programme. Centralised payments, digital identity, cloud adoption and common platforms were presented as ways of allowing organisations to direct more people and resources towards service delivery rather than duplicate administrative functions.

The National Care Service Tested the Limits

The National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, introduced in June 2022 while Humza Yousaf was Health Secretary, went considerably further than shared administration.

As originally introduced, it would have allowed Scottish ministers to transfer specified social-care functions from local authorities and health boards to ministers or new care boards.

Scottish Parliament briefing material described those proposed care boards as directly accountable to Scottish ministers and directly funded by them, unlike existing integration arrangements linking

accountability to health boards and local authorities. The legislation also contained mechanisms for transferring staff, property and liabilities.

The proposal generated sustained disagreement over local accountability and was subsequently altered.

By 2023, the developing agreement with COSLA meant councils would retain functions, staff and assets which earlier versions of the programme had contemplated transferring.

The episode demonstrated that movement towards national structures was neither automatic nor irreversible. The final location of powers depended upon political agreement, legislation and negotiations between national and local government.

Yousaf: Local by Default, While Reform Continues

Humza Yousaf became First Minister in March 2023.

Three months later, his Government and COSLA signed the Verity House Agreement, adopting the maxim “local by default, national by agreement”.

The agreement stated that public responsibilities should generally be exercised by the authorities closest to citizens. When ministers considered national delivery models affecting councils, local government was to be involved from the beginning of policy development.

The principle represented a clear restatement of local-government autonomy, but the wider programme of administrative reform continued alongside it.

Yousaf’s administration continued work on digital transformation, the public estate, common digital components and shared administrative services. The Scottish Government’s Shared Services Programme was preparing the Oracle Cloud platform that would later replace older human-resources and finance systems across core government and dozens of public organisations.

The Yousaf period therefore combined two strands that remain visible in the 2026 proposals: an explicit commitment to subsidiarity and continued development of infrastructure capable of operating across institutional boundaries.

Swinney: Consolidation Becomes Structural

John Swinney returned to government as First Minister in May 2024.

Oracle Cloud went live that October as part of the Shared Services Programme, introducing a common platform across Scottish Government core and 32 other public-sector organisations. Human-resources, finance and purchasing functions could increasingly operate through common infrastructure rather than through separate systems maintained by every organisation.

The Public Service Reform Strategy published in June 2025 expanded the programme.

It formalised a “Once for Scotland” approach to shared services, with plans to bring suitable organisations onto common human-resources, finance and purchasing infrastructure and develop shared services at greater scale.

The same strategy made Intelligent Automation a national workstream, proposing a hub-and-spoke approach across core government and public bodies and describing automation and AI as tools for increasing capacity,

reducing costs and addressing operational pressures.

By September 2026, reform had moved from common systems into the institutional map.

The Programme for Government committed ministers to replacing Scotland's 14 territorial NHS boards with two strategic health boards and reducing the number of special boards.

It also committed the Government to substantially reducing the number of public bodies. SEPA, NatureScot and Zero Waste Scotland are to be brought into an overarching environmental organisation, potentially including Scottish Forestry. Transport Scotland is to return to core government. Other transport bodies, inspectorates, public-land organisations and parts of the wider public-body landscape are subject to further review or consolidation.

Twenty days later, the local-government side became considerably more specific.

The Government's 21 September paper proposes replacing the present arrangements with six to ten regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities.

Regional bodies could have enhanced responsibility for economic development and business support, housing, strategic planning, employability and transport. They would also retain responsibility for significant existing council services, including environmental services, regulatory functions and education, although some elements could be directed more locally.

Community authorities could take responsibility for functions including local planning decisions, licensing, community planning, greenspace, historic environments, town-centre regeneration and leisure, sport and cultural facilities.

Councillors would continue to be elected through the present ward structure and would sit on both levels. The same regional administrative and corporate structures would support the regional and community authorities.

The Government also proposes a statutory obligation requiring regional authorities to devolve appropriate functions to community authorities.

Some responsibilities presently exercised by national public bodies could also be transferred into regional or local democratic control.

The proposed local structure is not at the same stage as every other reform in the programme. The reduction from 14 territorial NHS boards to two strategic boards is stated as a Government commitment. The six-to-ten regional authorities and 120-to-160 community authorities are explicitly an opening proposition for negotiation.

Their boundaries do not yet exist. Their precise legal powers have not been allocated. Funding has not been settled. Local and regional revenue-raising powers remain under discussion. The detailed relationship between education, social care, housing, health, transport and the new structures has not been determined.

The Government says it wants agreement first on which responsibilities should sit at national, regional and community level, with funding arrangements following from that division.

The Same Signature at Both Ends

Swinney provides an unusual line of continuity across the period.

In 2011, his signature appeared beneath a Government response that made greater integration of public services at local level one of the foundations of reform.

In 2012, as finance secretary, he described local government as a central participant in the reform process and spoke about cooperation among councils, health services, police and the third sector at local level.

By 2025, as First Minister, he was still presenting his reform programme through the Christie principles of empowerment, integration, efficiency and prevention.

The administrative programme surrounding those principles had nevertheless changed.

His Government now intends to replace 14 territorial health boards with two strategic boards, reduce the number of national public bodies, combine environmental organisations, extend common corporate systems, increase data interoperability and expand AI-assisted administration.

At the same time, Swinney has argued that larger strategic institutions and stronger local government need not be opposites.

The proposal published on 21 September gives that position its clearest institutional form so far.

Instead of organising local government primarily around 32 unitary councils, the opening model would distribute responsibilities across three levels: national, regional and community. Six to ten regional authorities would sit above a network of 120 to 160 community authorities, with a proposed statutory duty requiring suitable functions to be devolved downwards.

The question is therefore no longer simply whether powers gathered into larger bodies will be matched by anything moving in the other direction.

The Government has now identified a mechanism through which it proposes that downward movement should occur.

What remains unresolved is the substance of that transfer: which statutory powers, budgets, assets, staff and legal discretion community authorities would actually receive; how much freedom regional authorities would have from national government; and which functions now belonging to national public bodies would move into democratically controlled regional or local institutions.

There is also a structural characteristic within the Government's proposal that will require examination as the model develops.

Although community authorities would make decisions at a smaller geographical scale, they would use the same overall regional administrative and corporate structures as their regional authority.

Local decision-making and administrative decentralisation are therefore not necessarily the same thing under the model. A community authority could possess legal authority over a local function while payroll, procurement, technology, records or other administrative systems continued to operate at regional or national scale.

The result is more complex than a simple movement from local to central government.

Swinney's 2011 reform programme sought locally integrated services within Scotland's existing institutional landscape. His 2026 programme proposes substantially larger strategic institutions in some areas, substantially smaller democratic decision-making units in others, and more common administrative and digital infrastructure connecting them.

What Did Voters Actually Approve?

The 2026 Scottish Parliament election returned the SNP as the largest party with 58 of the Parliament's 129 seats, leaving it short of an overall majority.

The SNP manifesto contained a clear public-service reform programme.

It promised to reduce the number of public bodies, invest in technology to support more joined-up and lower-cost services, reform and simplify the public-sector landscape and devolve power to people and communities.

It also committed the party to introducing a Public Service Renewal Bill during the first year of the Parliament.

The institutional arrangements announced after the election are considerably more specific.

The manifesto did not present voters with a proposal to replace Scotland's 14 territorial NHS boards with two strategic boards.

It did not set out a model replacing present local-government arrangements with six to ten regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities.

Nor did it identify the subsequent proposal to combine SEPA, NatureScot and Zero Waste Scotland in a single overarching environmental organisation.

Public-service reform was therefore part of the electoral programme. The detailed institutional architecture through which ministers now propose to carry it out was developed subsequently.

Where those changes require legislation, they will proceed through a Scottish Parliament in which the Government does not hold an outright majority.

Twenty Thousand Users, One Corporate Platform

Oracle provides the clearest existing example of what shared administration means in practice.

The platform was introduced across Scottish Government core and 32 other public-sector organisations in October 2024. It covers corporate functions including finance, purchasing and, for many users, human resources and payroll.

That does not mean everybody using the platform can see everybody else's records. Access is governed through permissions, and Oracle should not be confused with a single national repository containing health records, social-care files or every item of information held about citizens.

Its significance lies elsewhere.

Legally separate institutions can retain their own statutory identities while relying on common underlying infrastructure for essential administrative functions.

Cloud infrastructure can provide professional backup, replication, cybersecurity and disaster recovery that smaller independent systems may struggle to reproduce.

It can also create shared dependencies.

Where organisations operate completely separate systems, a failure can remain confined to one institution. Where many organisations depend upon the same platform, the resilience of that platform — and of the communications networks through which individual organisations reach it — becomes more significant.

Scottish public-sector cyber-resilience requirements call for tested backups, disaster-recovery arrangements, alternative transmission routes where necessary and contingency mechanisms capable of maintaining essential services, even at reduced levels, when primary information systems fail.

Less visible publicly is the detailed local fallback arrangement for each organisation using common infrastructure: whether urgent purchasing or payroll can continue, which essential information remains available locally, how long individual services can function without the central system and what happens when the cloud platform itself remains operational but a rural or island office loses the telecommunications connection needed to reach it.

These questions are not arguments against cloud computing.

They concern the balance between eliminating unnecessary administrative duplication and retaining genuinely independent resilience.

From Separate Records to “Tell Us Once”

The next layer concerns information about citizens.

The Government is developing a “tell us once” model alongside shared data definitions, common datasets, Data Exchange and reusable digital services.

The intention is to reduce repeated requests for the same information across public services and make information held within one organisation more useful where another service lawfully requires it.

That does not establish that every Scottish citizen record is being transferred into a single national database.

It does indicate movement away from information remaining entirely isolated within individual organisations and towards controlled reuse and interoperability.

Information does not have to be physically stored in one database for multiple organisations to be capable of retrieving or using it through connected systems.

ScotAccount: Scotland Already Has Digital Identity Infrastructure

ScotAccount forms part of that architecture.

It allows people to use one account across participating Scottish public services and can support identity verification and reuse of verified identity attributes.

At 1 June 2026, the Scottish Government reported just over 768,000 registered ScotAccount accounts.

The Government has also confirmed that the identity-verification process involves biometric data derived from official documentation and a user selfie, placing that information within the special-category provisions of UK data-protection law.

ScotAccount is therefore digital-identity infrastructure.

It is not presently a compulsory national identity system.

The Scottish Government has also said there are no current plans simply to connect ScotAccount to proposed UK national digital-identity infrastructure. Discussions concerning interoperability and federation with GOV.UK One Login were exploratory when the Government responded to an FOI request in August 2026, with no agreed technical design or data flows at that point.

Questions Readers May Have

Is Scotland building a digital identity system that could become difficult to opt out of later?

Scotland already has a government digital-identity system in ScotAccount.

It is intended to allow one account to be used across participating public services, to verify identity and to permit reuse of specified verified attributes such as name, date of birth and address.

The Scottish Government currently describes ScotAccount as voluntary and says non-digital routes should remain available for people who cannot or choose not to use digital channels.

That is the current policy position rather than a guarantee that every service must permanently maintain an identical non-digital route regardless of future legislation, policy or service redesign.

The practical test will therefore be whether people who do not use ScotAccount can continue to obtain the underlying service, establish their identity, communicate with a person and challenge a decision through a reasonably accessible alternative.

Why isn't John Swinney calling the wider programme a system ready for digital ID?

The Scottish Government does use the term digital identity when describing ScotAccount.

It describes ScotAccount as a common service through which people can sign in to multiple public services, prove their identity and reuse verified attributes.

What the Government does not do is describe the whole public-service reform programme as a digital-ID programme.

The wider architecture is described through other terms: joined-up digital public services, common platforms and components, Data Exchange, “tell us once”, shared datasets, the ScotGov App and automation.

ScotAccount nevertheless operates as a reusable identity component within that wider architecture.

In that technical sense, participating services can already be designed to use a common Scottish Government identity service instead of each creating an entirely separate mechanism for verifying identity.

That is not evidence that Scotland has adopted a compulsory national digital ID. It has not.

Nor does the published programme establish that every public service will require ScotAccount.

As more services use the same identity layer, however, the practical significance of the system will depend increasingly upon which services require verified digital identity, which attributes can be reused, how that reuse is authorised and whether genuinely usable alternatives remain available.

There is no evidence in the published record establishing that Swinney is deliberately avoiding the term “digital ID”. The Government openly uses that description for ScotAccount while placing the broader programme under the headings of public-service reform and joined-up digital services.

Could a future Scottish Government make ScotAccount effectively compulsory even if it remained technically voluntary?

A digital service can remain formally voluntary while becoming harder to avoid if alternative routes become slower, more difficult to find, available only through limited telephone services or dependent upon fewer physical offices.

The Scottish Government’s present policy recognises that not everybody can or will use ScotAccount and says services using it should maintain alternative routes.

The relevant measure is therefore not simply whether the service continues to be described as voluntary.

It is whether a person continues to have a practical and reasonably equivalent means of obtaining the underlying public service without using the digital identity system.

Banking provides a comparison of how formal choice and practical availability can diverge.

Customers are not legally required to use online banking, but widespread branch closures have reduced face-to-face banking availability in many communities, contributing to the development of banking hubs and regulatory protections concerning access to cash.

A service can therefore remain technically optional while its alternative becomes progressively less convenient or accessible.

Does one ScotAccount mean all of my information is being put into one government database?

No evidence establishes that Scotland is creating a single database containing every citizen record.

ScotAccount is intended to verify identity and enable specified verified attributes to be reused across participating services. Other parts of the public sector continue to maintain their own systems and records.

The wider change concerns interoperability.

Data Exchange, common data definitions, reusable datasets and “tell us once” can allow information held by separate organisations to become accessible across organisational boundaries without physically combining every record in one database.

The relevant questions are therefore which organisations can obtain particular information, the legal basis upon which they can obtain it, the purpose for which it can be used, how access is recorded and whether permissions or data-sharing arrangements can subsequently be changed.

Once information is being reused between public services, can that sharing be rolled back?

Technically, systems and access permissions can be altered.

Legally, information sharing continues to require an appropriate lawful basis and remains subject to

data-protection law.

Practical reversibility is a separate question.

If staffing structures, service design and administrative processes become dependent upon shared information, reversing those arrangements may require systems to be rebuilt, separate datasets recreated, contracts altered and local administrative capabilities restored.

Reversal remains possible, but the organisational cost can increase as dependence deepens.

Is Scotland becoming locked into Oracle?

The Scottish Government has itself identified vendor lock-in as a risk associated with cloud services.

Its guidance advises public organisations to plan how they would leave a supplier, consider standards that improve portability and understand the cost of transferring systems and extracting data.

Oracle should therefore not be treated as an irreversible constitutional structure. Contracts can end and technology can be replaced.

Practical replacement may nevertheless become more difficult as organisations redesign finance, purchasing, human-resources processes, staffing practices and other systems around one platform.

The relevant measures of resilience include tested exit arrangements, portable data, documented processes and the capacity to move to another provider without losing essential functions.

How many organisations now depend on Oracle, and what exactly is inside it?

The Oracle Cloud shared service was introduced for Scottish Government core and 32 other public-sector organisations.

It principally supports corporate administration, including finance and purchasing and, for many organisations, human resources and payroll.

It is not a single repository containing NHS patient records, social-care files or all data held about Scottish citizens.

The arrangement demonstrates how legal independence and administrative independence can diverge.

A regulator, agency or public body can retain its legal identity while relying upon common infrastructure for payroll, purchasing, accounting or personnel management.

What happens if Oracle is working but a local office cannot reach it?

That is a different resilience problem from failure of the cloud platform itself.

Audit Scotland has reported on backup and disaster-recovery arrangements associated with the Oracle environment.

Those arrangements do not by themselves establish what happens in an individual office if local telecommunications fail while the central platform remains available elsewhere.

The local questions include whether essential information remains accessible, whether urgent purchasing and

payroll functions can continue, whether manual procedures exist and how long a service is expected to operate without access to the common platform.

A remote backup protects against some forms of system loss. It does not restore connectivity to an office that cannot reach the system.

Is removing local duplication always beneficial?

Different forms of duplication serve different purposes.

Two organisations separately carrying out identical administrative processing may create unnecessary expense.

Two independent communications routes, separate contingency procedures or locally accessible copies of essential information may provide resilience.

Scottish Government cloud guidance recognises that increased dependence upon cloud services makes internet availability increasingly important to business continuity.

The relevant assessment therefore depends upon what is being duplicated and what function that duplication performs.

Could Scotland become so dependent on one technology supplier that changing policy later becomes impractical?

That is the problem normally described as vendor lock-in.

The Scottish Government's own cloud guidance recognises the risk and identifies standards, portability, exit planning and knowledge of switching costs as safeguards.

Dependence can extend beyond the software contract itself.

Staff training, data structures, integrations with other systems, internal procedures and workflows can all become organised around a particular platform.

A government can therefore remain legally able to change supplier while facing considerable practical and financial costs in doing so.

Is AI going to make decisions about people?

The published Scottish Government programme does not establish that autonomous AI has been given authority to make statutory decisions about citizens.

It does envisage greater use of AI and automation, including systems capable of assisting staff, accessing information and interacting with business systems.

Automation can influence a decision without issuing the final legal determination.

A system may prioritise cases, identify risks, select information for a member of staff, generate recommendations or direct a case into a particular workflow.

The Government's AI guidance therefore places emphasis on human oversight and accountability.

The precise safeguards will depend upon how individual systems are designed and used.

Can a person demand a human decision instead of an automated one?

UK data-protection law provides particular protections where decisions are made solely by automated means and produce legal or similarly significant effects.

Those protections can include safeguards concerning human intervention and challenge.

Many systems may not fall into the category of being solely automated.

Where software produces a recommendation and a person formally makes the final decision, the legal position can differ even where automation had a substantial influence over the process.

The practical questions are therefore whether the human genuinely reviews the evidence, whether that person can depart from the automated recommendation, whether the citizen is informed that automation played a role and whether an incorrect result can be challenged and corrected.

Who decides what an AI or automated system is allowed to do?

The software has no independent legal authority.

The rules within a system can result from legislation, ministerial policy, decisions made by public organisations, procurement specifications, administrative procedures and technical design.

Those responsibilities can become distributed across several organisations and contractors.

A public official may remain legally responsible for a decision while part of the workflow or recommendation used to produce it was developed elsewhere.

Effective accountability therefore depends upon an identifiable public authority retaining responsibility for the decision and having the ability to understand, audit, change and override the systems it uses.

Could a computer effectively say “no” while a human remains responsible only on paper?

It is technically possible for an automated system to exert substantial influence over an outcome even when a human being formally authorises the final decision.

If software filters a case, determines a score, identifies a risk or prevents a case from reaching a decision-maker in the ordinary workflow, automation may shape the outcome before the formal decision stage.

Meaningful human oversight therefore depends upon the decision-maker being able to see the underlying evidence, understand how the automated recommendation was produced and depart from it where appropriate.

Is digital consolidation weakening local government?

Shared digital infrastructure does not automatically remove statutory powers from councils or other local bodies.

An authority may continue to possess the legal power to make a decision while becoming increasingly dependent upon larger systems for finance, procurement, identity management, records or administrative workflow.

The Government's new local-governance proposal makes the difference particularly visible.

Community authorities could exercise decisions at a smaller geographical scale while being supported by the same regional administrative and corporate infrastructure as the larger regional authority.

Formal decentralisation of a decision therefore does not necessarily require decentralisation of the technology or administration used to carry it out.

The measure of operational independence will be how much control regional and community institutions retain over budgets, systems, records, staff and procedures required to exercise their legal responsibilities.

Is Scotland becoming less locally controlled?

The proposed structure moves authority in both directions.

Some responsibilities currently exercised through Scotland's 32 councils could move upwards into six to ten larger regional authorities.

The Government identifies economic development, housing, strategic planning, employability, transport and major public services among the areas that could operate at regional scale.

Other decisions could move downwards into 120 to 160 community authorities.

The Government identifies householder planning applications, community planning, licensing, management of historic environments and greenspace, town-centre regeneration and local leisure, sport and cultural facilities among the functions that could operate there.

The proposal goes beyond earlier statements about community empowerment by proposing a statutory obligation requiring regional authorities to devolve appropriate functions to community authorities.

It also opens the possibility of functions presently held by national public bodies being transferred into regional or local democratic control.

Those powers have not yet been finally allocated.

Neither the boundaries nor funding arrangements are settled, and the Government says the division of responsibilities between national, regional and community government must be agreed before decisions are taken about funding and revenue-raising powers.

The final balance can therefore be measured once detailed proposals emerge: which statutory powers, budgets, assets and executive decisions move upwards from the current council level; which move downwards into community authorities; and which move from national organisations into regional or local democratic control.

Are Scotland's 32 councils definitely being abolished?

No final decision of that kind has yet been taken.

The Scottish Government's opening proposition is that present local-government arrangements should be

replaced by six to ten regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities.

The paper repeatedly states that the model is a starting point for discussion rather than the Government's final position.

Detailed proposals are to be developed through discussions with Parliament, local authorities, communities and other organisations.

The final number of authorities, their boundaries, powers, funding and implementation arrangements therefore remain open.

Would the proposed system create another group of politicians?

Not under the Government's opening model.

Councillors would continue to be elected at existing ward level and would sit on both the relevant community authority and the associated regional authority.

The Government says this is intended to avoid another layer of elections or an additional tier of politicians.

It also acknowledges that dual membership would substantially increase councillors' responsibilities and would require consideration of remuneration and the time expected of them.

What would happen to Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles?

The Government says island communities require bespoke arrangements.

Its proposal allows for Island Single Authority Models rather than assuming that every island area would be fitted into the same regional and community structure used elsewhere.

The precise functions and design would be developed in discussions with the islands themselves and could differ between island groups.

Could NHS Scotland simply be merged into NHS England?

Not through an administrative decision by NHS England.

Health is devolved, and NHS Scotland and NHS England remain legally and institutionally separate systems.

Moving Scottish health responsibilities into a UK-wide structure would require legal and constitutional changes.

Shared technical standards, procurement arrangements, information systems or interoperable services are different from transferring constitutional responsibility for health.

Could shared digital infrastructure make a future merger easier?

Common standards and interoperable systems can reduce the technical work required to combine or coordinate services.

If organisations already use compatible identities, data standards and administrative platforms, some technical barriers to future integration can be lower.

That does not determine whether any future government would choose such a policy or whether Parliament would approve it.

Technical interoperability creates capability. It does not by itself determine constitutional or political decisions.

If Scotland wanted to reverse consolidation later, could it?

Policies, legislation and administrative structures can be changed by future governments and Parliaments.

The difficulty of doing so depends partly upon how far implementation has progressed.

The local-government proposal published on 21 September is still at an early stage and has not created the proposed regional or community authorities.

Other reforms are further advanced.

Once institutions have been abolished or merged, staff transferred, buildings closed, records migrated and administrative processes rebuilt around common infrastructure, restoring separate arrangements may require substantial time and expenditure.

Reversibility therefore depends upon practical design as well as legal authority.

Data portability, documented exit procedures, alternative suppliers, local contingency arrangements and retention of institutional knowledge can reduce the cost of later change.

What happens to paper records and local copies?

Public-records and retention duties do not disappear because administration becomes digital.

Scottish Government records remain subject to retention and disposal schedules, with selected records transferred permanently to National Records of Scotland.

What has not been established is that every item of information required for local continuity will continue to be physically or digitally accessible within the place where a service is delivered.

As common systems expand, continuity arrangements determine which information remains available when the primary system or connection cannot be used.

Can someone still walk into an office, use paper and speak to a person?

Current Scottish Government digital policy says alternative routes should remain available for people who cannot or choose not to use digital services.

Whether those alternatives remain equivalent depends upon how individual services are organised.

A nominal offline route may be less useful if it requires considerably greater travel, longer waits or access through a limited telephone service.

The proposed local-government reorganisation adds another unresolved element because the future geography of offices and customer-facing services has not yet been designed.

The practical position will have to be established service by service as the institutional structure develops.

What protections would prevent Scotland becoming dependent on systems that are difficult to undo?

The relevant safeguards are structural.

They include workable non-digital access where required; limits on the reuse of identity information; transparent data-sharing arrangements; human review and appeal mechanisms; data portability; open technical standards; supplier exit planning; independent backups; local continuity arrangements; procurement transparency; audit access; preservation of essential public records; and clear responsibility for consequential decisions.

Several of those principles already appear separately within Scottish Government policies covering cloud computing, records, data protection, cyber resilience and digital inclusion.

Their effectiveness will depend upon how they are applied as services and systems become more interconnected.

The Question Left by Fifteen Years of Reform

The structure proposed in 2026 is no longer simply a programme for reducing the number of public bodies or sharing administrative systems.

It is becoming a proposed redistribution of Scottish public administration across three levels.

At national level, the Government intends to reduce public bodies, replace 14 territorial health boards with two strategic boards, consolidate environmental organisations, expand shared corporate infrastructure and continue development of interoperable data, digital services and automation.

At regional level, it now proposes between six and ten authorities with strategic responsibilities extending across economic development, housing, planning, transport and public services.

Beneath them, between 120 and 160 community authorities could take responsibility for decisions the Government considers better made close to individual towns, neighbourhoods and communities.

The architecture therefore contains both consolidation and decentralisation.

An independent institution can disappear at one level while a new decision-making body is created at another. Corporate technology can operate across Scotland while a licensing decision is taken locally. Health strategy can move into two large boards while responsibility for a greenspace or town centre could move to a community authority.

Legal powers can also remain distributed while the machinery underneath them becomes increasingly common.

A regional body may possess statutory responsibility while relying upon shared national technology. A community authority may take local decisions while using corporate systems operated at regional scale. Citizens may encounter several legally separate public services through one identity system. Public bodies may retain statutory identities while finance, procurement, personnel administration and data exchange become increasingly shared.

Institutional names alone will therefore provide only part of the answer to where practical authority sits.

The other measures are who controls the budget, who owns the assets, who employs the staff, who holds the records, who establishes the rules, who configures the systems, who can override an automated recommendation and which authority can make a decision without obtaining permission elsewhere.

In 2011, John Swinney signed a Scottish Government response to Christie which placed local integration, community participation and effective local delivery among the foundations of public-service reform.

In 2026, he leads a Government proposing to redraw both the upper and lower levels of that system while simultaneously consolidating much of its administrative and digital infrastructure.

The vocabulary surrounding reform has remained strikingly familiar across the period: prevention, integration, efficiency, empowerment and improved outcomes.

The machinery proposed to deliver those objectives has changed considerably.

The question left by the 21 September proposal is therefore more precise than whether Scotland is becoming more centralised or more decentralised.

It is which powers will ultimately sit nationally, regionally and locally — and whether the money, assets, staff, systems and practical authority required to exercise those powers will move with them.

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TRANSPORT | 21 September 2026

Northern Scotland Enters a Week of Nuclear Security and Military Training

Read online: <https://modern.scot/northern-scotland-enters-a-week-of-nuclear-security-and-military-training/>



An emergency-response exercise at Dounreay will close part of the A9 and stop passenger access at Georgemas Junction on 23 September, while military ranges across the northern Highlands have extensive live-fire windows during the same period. The events are separate, but together they expose a security landscape that is usually visible to the public only through road closures, railway notices and firing-range warnings.

A six-hour emergency exercise at Dounreay will close a

substantial section of the A9 in Caithness on Wednesday, 23 September, while trains will cease stopping at Georgemas Junction for the duration of the operation.

Nuclear Restoration Services Dounreay has said it will conduct a multi-agency emergency-response exercise with Nuclear Transport Solutions, emergency services and other responding organisations between 9am and 3pm. The exercise is planned and is intended to test emergency arrangements rather than respond to a real incident.

The disruption around it is substantial. Traffic Scotland lists the A9 from Latheron towards Georgemas for closure between 9am and 3pm, together with closures affecting the Banniskirk-to-Georgemas section. Diversions will send some northbound and southbound traffic through the A99 and Wick, while other vehicles can be redirected through the Halkirk area.

At the same time, Georgemas Junction railway station will close to passengers. National Rail says three ScotRail services will pass without stopping: the 7am Inverness to Wick, the 10.41am Inverness to Wick and the 12.34pm Wick to Inverness. No rail-replacement service is planned.

The choice of Georgemas is significant because it is part of the nuclear infrastructure serving Dounreay. Nuclear Transport Solutions' rail division operates the specialist railhead at Georgemas Junction that was constructed to support the movement of material associated with Dounreay's decommissioning programme. Nuclear Transport Solutions is part of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority group and its Direct Rail Services operation is the UK rail operator licensed to carry nuclear material.

Dounreay itself is no longer an operating power station. The former experimental nuclear complex on the Caithness coast was Britain's principal centre for fast-reactor research between 1955 and 1994 and is now Scotland's largest nuclear decommissioning and clean-up project.

That history has left a site requiring security arrangements considerably beyond those of an ordinary industrial plant.

Dounreay describes its security system as multi-layered and intelligence-led. Its approved security plans are

intended to address threats including sabotage, terrorism, espionage and insider risk. The site has secure perimeters, monitored access, detection equipment and round-the-clock protection by armed officers from the Civil Nuclear Constabulary.

Those officers are not members of the Armed Forces.

The Civil Nuclear Constabulary is a specialist civilian police force whose principal role is the armed protection of civil nuclear sites and nuclear material in transit. Counter-terrorism forms a central part of its work. Dounreay says CNC officers are permanently deployed at the site and can form part of its emergency response.

That distinction matters this week because genuine military live-fire activity is also taking place across northern Scotland, independently of the Dounreay exercise.

Cape Wrath: Almost Twenty-Four Hours a Day

The Ministry of Defence has authorised a particularly extensive firing window at Cape Wrath in Sutherland.

From 21 September until 30 September, the published firing period runs from 12.01am until 11.59pm each day.

That does not mean weapons will be fired continuously for almost 24 hours every day. Since 2026, the MOD's published range notices increasingly show the periods during which live firing may take place rather than only confirmed training bookings. Actual activity is indicated locally by the range warning system.

The size of the available window is nevertheless notable.

Cape Wrath is one of the most unusual military training areas in Europe. Covering about 25,000 acres near Durness, it allows land, sea and air training to take place in the same area. MOD guidance states that it is the only European range where those three forms of training can be conducted simultaneously and where the Royal Air Force can train using live 1,000lb bombs.

The range has historically been used for naval bombardment, air weapons training and major combined exercises. The surrounding sea can form part of the danger area when the range is active.

Red flags by day and red lights at night indicate that firing is taking place and that the public must not enter the danger area.

The September schedule gives Cape Wrath firing windows from 21 through 30 September without a break.

Tain: Live Fire Until 10pm

Farther south, the Tain Air Weapons Range in Ross-shire also has extensive firing hours throughout September.

The published timetable allows live firing from 9am until 10pm from Monday to Thursday and from 9am until 2pm on Fridays. The range is closed at weekends under the standard timetable, although operating requirements can result in changes.

Tain is one of five air-weapons ranges used by the MOD for operational training in the UK and one of two in Scotland, the other being Cape Wrath. Such ranges are used for military low flying and air-to-ground weapons training.

The MOD warns that the September timings are operating windows rather than a guarantee that firing will occur throughout those hours. Red flags and lights remain the definitive warning that the range or its sea danger area is active.

Fort George Is Also Available for Live Fire

The military training picture extends farther south again to Fort George, near Inverness.

Its September timetable permits live firing on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 9am until 4pm. Tuesdays and Thursdays can extend from 9am until 11.59pm, while Sunday firing is permitted between 9am and 12.30pm.

Fieldcraft training can also occur without live ammunition. In those circumstances the public may encounter military training even where the usual live-fire flags are not displayed, with local signs used instead.

Cape Wrath, Tain and Fort George are therefore all operating within published military-training windows during the period in which the Dounreay emergency exercise will take place.

There is no published evidence that those range activities form part of the Dounreay exercise.

They should be treated as separate events.

The MOD Has Changed What Its Firing Notices Mean

The wider development behind the range schedules is more significant than any single day of firing.

The Ministry of Defence now states on its Scottish firing notices that the Army is at “heightened readiness” because of what it describes as a new era of threat. It says this has increased demands on the Defence Training Estate, with training taking place more regularly and at shorter notice.

As a consequence, the MOD has changed the way its public firing notices work.

Previously, published notices primarily reflected training bookings already made in advance. The new approach publishes the standard periods during which live firing can be permitted. That gives the Armed Forces greater flexibility to schedule activity at shorter notice, while leaving members of the public to rely more heavily on range flags, lights and local warnings to determine whether firing is actually taking place.

The change is important when interpreting the long firing periods shown for September.

A published 9am-to-10pm window at Tain does not mean 13 continuous hours of live fire. Cape Wrath's near-24-hour window does not establish that bombing or gunfire will continue through the night.

It establishes the period during which the MOD may operate the range.

Dounreay Is Already Under Increased Safety Scrutiny

There is another important part of the Dounreay picture that should not be confused with either the 23 September exercise or the military activity.

The Office for Nuclear Regulation currently places Dounreay at an Enhanced regulatory-attention level for nuclear safety.

Its security attention level remains Routine.

Those two classifications matter because they show that the increased regulatory attention concerns safety rather than an identified deterioration in the site's security arrangements.

Dounreay was moved into enhanced safety attention during 2024 after ONR identified concerns involving the condition of site assets, management of conventional high-hazard work, extensive organisational change and the storage of alkali metals including sodium.

Some of the most serious findings involved buildings holding bulk sodium associated with the Prototype Fast Reactor. Inspectors found water entering facilities where sodium containers were stored, corrosion affecting containers and shortcomings in the site's arrangements for identifying and managing degradation.

Sodium reacts strongly with water.

ONR served an improvement notice requiring Nuclear Restoration Services to improve the arrangements.

The immediate storage arrangements have subsequently improved. ONR closed the improvement notice after concluding that the required work had been completed, and later inspections received green ratings.

The regulator has nevertheless said concerns remain about longer-term sodium storage and disposal, the condition of some buildings and systems, conventional health-and-safety management and the effect of organisational change. Dounreay consequently remains at Enhanced rather than Routine safety attention.

None of that establishes any connection with the emergency-response exercise on 23 September.

Indeed, ONR continues to classify the site's civil nuclear security performance separately at Routine.

Fire Protection Is Also Being Improved

Dounreay was also included in a European-wide examination of nuclear fire protection published this month.

The Office for Nuclear Regulation concluded that UK nuclear installations met the required overall fire-safety standards and identified no fundamental sector-wide failure. It nevertheless identified areas where arrangements should be strengthened at Dounreay, Sellafield and Springfields.

At Dounreay, the work includes better formalisation and integration of fire-safety arrangements and greater attention to combined or consequential hazards involving fire.

Improvements are already under way.

Again, the regulatory work is separate from the 23 September exercise.

Why Nuclear Transport Solutions Is Involved

The presence of Nuclear Transport Solutions in the Dounreay exercise is particularly relevant because nuclear transport has become an essential part of the site's decommissioning.

The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's current strategy confirms that spent nuclear fuel from Dounreay is transported by rail for management at Sellafield. Other nuclear and radioactive materials are also transported between sites as the old nuclear estate is dismantled and consolidated.

Georgemas Junction was developed specifically to make those movements possible.

The specialist railhead includes infrastructure designed for the movement of heavy nuclear transport loads

from Caithness to the national rail system. Nuclear Transport Solutions says the facility continues to support material movements associated with Dounreay.

Nuclear transport therefore connects the remote Caithness site with infrastructure extending far beyond the perimeter fence.

An emergency involving transport would likewise require organisations outside Dounreay itself to respond.

That provides important context for a six-hour exercise involving the nuclear site, its transport organisation, emergency services and other agencies and extensive enough to disrupt both the A9 and the Far North Line.

What Is Not Yet Public

The basic structure of Wednesday's exercise is known. Its detailed scenario is not.

The public information presently available identifies a multi-agency emergency-response exercise involving Nuclear Restoration Services Dounreay, Nuclear Transport Solutions, emergency services and other responding agencies.

It does not provide a full participant list.

It does not establish that serving military personnel will take part.

It does not identify the precise simulated incident.

It does not state publicly whether the scenario begins on the Dounreay site, on the transport network or across both.

Nor does the information presently available explain precisely why such a long section of the A9 must be closed or why passenger access to Georgemas Junction must cease completely during the exercise.

Those are reasonable questions for Dounreay, Nuclear Transport Solutions and the responding authorities once the exercise is complete.

The exercise should also produce a record of what worked, what failed and what changes follow. Emergency exercises at nuclear sites exist to test arrangements rather than merely demonstrate them.

Whether those lessons will be made public is another question.

A Northern Security Landscape

The events of this week should not be combined into a single security operation where no evidence supports doing so.

The Dounreay exercise is a civil nuclear emergency-response exercise.

The Civil Nuclear Constabulary officers protecting Dounreay are armed police, not soldiers.

Cape Wrath, Tain and Fort George are Ministry of Defence training ranges.

Their live-fire schedules are military activity.

What connects them publicly is geography and timing rather than any established operational link.

On 23 September, part of Caithness's principal road will close and trains will pass through Georgemas without taking passengers while organisations responsible for one of Britain's most sensitive former nuclear complexes rehearse an emergency.

At the same time, military training areas across the northern mainland are available for live firing under a system the Ministry of Defence says has changed because the Armed Forces require greater training flexibility during a period of heightened readiness.

At Cape Wrath, that firing window extends for almost the entire day, every day, from 21 to 30 September.

For people living in the north, these are not abstract national-security arrangements. They occupy roads, railway stations, airspace, moorland, coastal waters and places where communities live alongside some of Britain's most specialised nuclear and defence infrastructure.

The distinction between those activities matters.

So does knowing that they are happening.

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National Rail, No trains at Georgemas Junction between 09:00 and 15:00 on Wednesday 23 September.

Nuclear Transport Solutions, Georgemas Junction.

Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, The NDA Group Strategy 2026.

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POLICY AND GOVERNMENT | 21 September 2026

The Great Consolidation of Scotland's Public Bodies

Read online: <https://modern.scot/the-great-consolidation-of-scotlands-public-bodies/>



Scotland's Public-Sector Reorganisation Now Reaches Local Government

Scotland's public administration is entering a five-year reorganisation affecting health boards, councils, environmental agencies, transport bodies, regulators, public records, corporate services and digital systems. A proposal published on 21 September has now added the clearest local-government model yet: Scotland's existing arrangements could be replaced by six to ten regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities, while separate national reforms reduce health boards and public bodies and expand shared administrative and digital infrastructure. Modern Scot maps the organisations that exist now, the changes the Scottish Government has actually announced, and what remains unresolved about powers, jobs, offices, records and where functions will eventually be carried out.

The Scottish Government began September with a public-sector structure containing 14 territorial NHS boards, 32 councils, 31 health and social-care integration areas and a national public-body directory extending across executive agencies, regulators, commissioners, public corporations, health organisations and other statutory bodies.

On 1 September, First Minister John Swinney announced a five-year programme intended to alter that structure substantially.

The Government describes the programme as a “rewiring” of the Scottish state. Its Programme for Government says the number of public bodies will be substantially reduced, some named organisations will be combined or brought into government, other sectors will be reviewed for merger, and more administrative functions will operate through common systems and shared services.

Twenty days later, the local-government element became considerably more specific.

The Government published an opening proposition under which existing local-government arrangements could be replaced by six to ten regional authorities responsible principally for strategic decisions and 120 to 160 community authorities operating closer to individual towns, districts, neighbourhoods and islands.

Councillors would continue to be elected at the existing ward level and would sit on both the relevant community authority and regional authority. The same overall regional administrative and corporate

structures would support both levels.

The Government also proposes a statutory obligation requiring regional authorities to devolve appropriate functions to community authorities, while island communities could receive bespoke Single Authority Models.

That does not amount to a completed replacement map.

The local-government paper explicitly describes the model as a starting point for discussion rather than the Government's final position. Boundaries have not been drawn. The final allocation of statutory powers has not been agreed. Funding arrangements and local or regional revenue-raising powers remain unresolved.

Other parts of the programme are at different stages.

Replacing 14 territorial health boards with two strategic boards is an announced government policy. Exploring a single ferries body is not yet a decision to establish one. Investigating consolidation of organisations managing public land does not identify which bodies will eventually disappear.

Nor does the disappearance of an organisational name necessarily mean that its work disappears.

Environmental regulation will still be required if environmental bodies are combined. Roads and rail will still require administration if Transport Scotland ceases to operate as a separate executive agency. Hospitals and community health services will continue to function when the territorial-board structure changes.

The questions are therefore no longer confined to how many organisations remain.

They include which functions move upwards, which move downwards, who controls them, which local structures survive, where records are held, who employs the staff, where administrative work is located and how much practical independence remains when several legally separate authorities use the same corporate or digital systems.

Scotland's Reorganisation at a Glance

Territorial NHS Boards

Scotland currently has 14 territorial NHS boards:

Existing territorial NHS board

Announced change

NHS Ayrshire & Arran

NHS Borders

NHS Dumfries & Galloway

NHS Fife

NHS Forth Valley

NHS Grampian

The 14 territorial boards are to be replaced by two Strategic Health Boards.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

NHS Highland

NHS Lanarkshire

NHS Lothian

NHS Orkney

NHS Shetland

NHS Tayside

NHS Western Isles

The Government has not yet published the final boundaries, headquarters, membership or detailed division of responsibilities of the two replacement boards.

The current 14-board structure and the Government's intention to replace it with two strategic boards are both explicit in the official record.

National and Special NHS Bodies

Alongside the territorial boards, the current national health-body landscape includes:

Current national or special health body

Present position

Healthcare Improvement Scotland

Government intends further reduction of special health boards

Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

Final future structure not published

National Waiting Times Centre Board / NHS Golden Jubilee

Final future structure not published

NHS 24

Final future structure not published

Public Health Scotland

Final future structure not published

Public Services Delivery Scotland

Created in 2026 from NHS Education for Scotland and NHS National Services Scotland

Scottish Ambulance Service Board

Final future structure not published

State Hospital Board for Scotland

Final future structure not published

The Programme for Government says the reduction from 14 territorial boards to two will be accompanied by further reduction in the number of special boards. It does not yet identify the complete next-stage structure.

Local Government: 32 Councils, a Proposed 6–10 Regions and 120–160 Community Authorities

Scotland's 32 councils continue to exist under the present statutory arrangements:

Council

Council

Aberdeen City Council

Aberdeenshire Council

Angus Council

Argyll and Bute Council

City of Edinburgh Council

Clackmannanshire Council

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Dumfries and Galloway Council

Dundee City Council

East Ayrshire Council

East Dunbartonshire Council

East Lothian Council

East Renfrewshire Council

Falkirk Council

Fife Council

Glasgow City Council

Highland Council

Inverclyde Council

Midlothian Council

Moray Council

North Ayrshire Council

North Lanarkshire Council

Orkney Islands Council

Perth and Kinross Council

Renfrewshire Council

Scottish Borders Council

Shetland Islands Council

South Ayrshire Council

South Lanarkshire Council

Stirling Council

West Dunbartonshire Council

West Lothian Council

The legal structure has not yet changed. The Government has not abolished the 32 councils or published legislation creating their replacements.

It has, however, now gone considerably further than the general commitment to regional government contained in the 1 September Programme for Government.

Its opening proposition is that present local-government arrangements should be replaced by between six and ten regional authorities and between 120 and 160 community authorities.

Regional authorities would concentrate on strategic functions.

The Government identifies regional economic development and business support, housing, strategic planning, employability support and transport among the areas that could operate at that scale.

Regional authorities would also continue to assure delivery of major services currently provided by councils, including environmental services such as waste and cleansing, civil defence and resilience, regulatory services, early learning and education.

The proposed community authorities would operate at a smaller geographical scale.

The Government gives examples such as Kilmarnock, Leith, Blairgowrie and Rattray and says authorities could be organised around towns, districts, villages or islands where people recognise a distinct community.

Functions considered for that level include householder planning applications, community planning, licensing decisions, management of historic environments, open space and greenspace, town-centre regeneration and the provision and maintenance of local leisure, sport and cultural facilities.

Community authorities could also have a role in planning, commissioning and delivering joined-up community support.

The proposal does not create another class of elected politician.

Councillors would continue to be elected at existing ward level and would sit on both the relevant community authority and the associated regional authority.

The same overall regional administrative and corporate structures would support both levels.

That creates an important separation between the geographical scale at which a decision is made and the scale at which the machinery supporting that decision operates.

A community authority could therefore make a local licensing, planning or greenspace decision while depending upon a regional structure for finance, human resources, procurement, technology or other corporate administration.

The Government says the model should include a statutory obligation requiring regional authorities to devolve appropriate functions to community authorities.

It also says functions currently sitting within national public bodies could potentially be brought into the regional or local democratic sphere.

For island communities, the Government proposes separate consideration of Island Single Authority Models rather than assuming that Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles must fit the same structure as mainland Scotland.

No boundaries have yet been published for the proposed regions or community authorities.

No final list of powers has been allocated to either level.

The Government says the division of responsibility between national, regional and community levels should be determined first. Funding arrangements would then follow, including consideration of local and regional revenue-raising powers.

Health and Social-Care Integration

Scotland also has 31 health and social-care integration areas:

Integration area

Integration area

Aberdeen City

Aberdeenshire

Angus

Argyll and Bute

Clackmannanshire and Stirling

Dumfries and Galloway

Dundee City

East Ayrshire

East Dunbartonshire

East Lothian

East Renfrewshire

Edinburgh

Falkirk

Fife

Glasgow City

Highland

Inverclyde

Midlothian

Moray

North Ayrshire

North Lanarkshire

Orkney Islands

Perth and Kinross

Renfrewshire

Scottish Borders

Shetland Islands

South Ayrshire

South Lanarkshire

West Dunbartonshire

West Lothian

Western Isles / Na h-Eileanan Siar

Their future now sits at the intersection of two restructuring programmes.

The Government is replacing the 14 territorial health boards with two strategic boards while also proposing regional and community local government.

Its 21 September paper says all options for social care services and social work should be considered in light of those new structures.

It says the current integration arrangements are not meeting people's needs in all circumstances and places social care, primary and community health, housing and family support within the same discussion.

No final replacement structure for the 31 integration areas has been agreed.

Environment

Four existing organisations are explicitly identified in the environmental restructuring:

Existing organisation

Government plan

Scottish Environment Protection Agency — SEPA

NatureScot

Single overarching environmental body

Zero Waste Scotland

Scottish Forestry

Potential inclusion in the same structure

SEPA, NatureScot and Zero Waste Scotland are explicitly intended to enter the new environmental organisation.

Scottish Forestry may also be included.

The Government has not yet published the final statutory structure, headquarters, regional office arrangements or workforce design.

Food Regulation and Scrutiny

Existing organisation

Proposed change

Food Standards Scotland

Becomes institutional home for additional functions

Scottish Food Commission

Integrate into Food Standards Scotland

Scottish Pubs Code Adjudicator

Integrate into Food Standards Scotland

The Government says the independent scrutiny functions of the Scottish Food Commission and Scottish Pubs Code Adjudicator are to be maintained after integration.

Architecture and Housing

Existing organisation

Proposed change

Architecture & Design Scotland

Embed within More Homes Scotland

This is an announced government measure rather than a general review.

Transport

Transport Scotland itself is only one organisation within the national transport structure.

Existing organisation

Announced position

Transport Scotland

Return to core Scottish Government

Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland

Consultation on transfer into Scottish Government

National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board

Functions under review

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd

Within wider transport and ferry landscape under consideration

David MacBrayne Ltd

Within wider transport and ferry landscape under consideration

Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd

Remaining transport bodies subject to merger review

Scottish Canals

Remaining transport bodies subject to merger review

Scottish Road Works Commissioner

Remaining transport bodies subject to merger review

Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd

Remaining transport bodies subject to merger review

The Programme for Government does not say that all of the latter organisations will merge.

It says remaining transport bodies will be reviewed to identify merger opportunities.

The 21 September local-governance proposal adds another possible route for restructuring.

The Government says regional authorities could take responsibility for relevant areas of transport, specifically including Regional Transport Partnerships and potentially some functions currently held by Transport Scotland.

Scotland currently has seven statutory Regional Transport Partnerships:

Regional Transport Partnership

Area

HITRANS

Highlands and Islands

NESTRANS

North East Scotland

SEStran

South East Scotland

SWestrans

South West Scotland

Strathclyde Partnership for Transport — SPT

Strathclyde

TACTRAN

Tayside and Central Scotland

ZetTrans

Shetland

The Government has not announced that all seven partnerships will be abolished.

The new paper instead places their functions within the discussion about what a future regional authority could do.

That leaves several possible outcomes open: existing partnerships could remain, functions could move, structures could be combined, or different arrangements could emerge in different parts of Scotland.

Clyde and Western Isles Ferries

The present publicly controlled ferry structure divides responsibilities between several organisations.

Organisation

Current role

Transport Scotland

Government policy, sponsorship and contract functions

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd — CMAL

Vessel and harbour asset ownership

David MacBrayne Ltd

Publicly owned parent company

CalMac Ferries Ltd

Ferry operator

The Government says it will explore creation of a single ferries body for Clyde and Western Isles services.

No final replacement organisation has been published.

The proposed regional-government model could also affect the wider transport landscape, but the 21 September paper does not state that ferry responsibilities will be transferred to regional authorities.

Records and Registers

Existing organisation

Government position

National Records of Scotland

Reform activity announced

Registers of Scotland

Reform activity announced

The Programme for Government does not state that these organisations will merge.

It commits the Government to reform activity involving both.

National Records of Scotland is responsible for functions including the national archives, civil registration, census and demographic work. Registers of Scotland maintains Scotland's principal land and property registers.

Parliamentary Commissioners and Ombudsmen

The present directory includes:

Body

Ethical Standards Commissioner

Patient Safety Commissioner

Scottish Biometrics Commissioner

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People

Scottish Human Rights Commission

Scottish Information Commissioner

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

Standards Commission for Scotland

The Government says it intends to work with the Scottish Parliament on previous reviews of this landscape with a view to reducing the number of bodies while protecting their functions.

No final structure has been published.

Revenue Scotland

Revenue Scotland remains a separate non-ministerial office.

The Government intends to explore whether it can take on a broader range of revenue functions.

That represents possible expansion of its responsibilities rather than an announced merger.

Inspectorates, Audit and Scrutiny

The Programme for Government commits ministers to rationalising the number of bodies performing inspectorate functions and to working with Audit Scotland on simplification of the audit and scrutiny landscape.

Current nationally listed inspectorate and scrutiny organisations include, among others:

Existing body

Audit Scotland

Care Inspectorate

Healthcare Improvement Scotland

HM Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland

HM Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in Scotland

HM Chief Inspector of Prosecution in Scotland

HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland

Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

Scottish Housing Regulator

Environmental Standards Scotland

Scottish Information Commissioner

The Government has not published a definitive list saying which of these organisations will be merged,

retained or otherwise structurally altered.

Culture

The Government says it will assess whether management of Scotland's national cultural assets can be simplified.

It has not announced a completed national cultural merger plan.

Current national bodies in this field include:

National cultural or heritage body

Creative Scotland

Historic Environment Scotland

National Galleries of Scotland

National Library of Scotland

National Museums Scotland

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

None should be described as a confirmed merger target unless and until the Government identifies a proposed structure.

The local-government proposal introduces a separate cultural question.

Community authorities could potentially take responsibility for local leisure, sport and cultural facilities and aspects of the historic environment.

That is distinct from the Government's examination of national cultural organisations.

Public Land

The Programme for Government commits ministers to investigating consolidation of public bodies involved in management of public land assets.

Bodies with significant land-management, land-policy or estate functions include Forestry and Land Scotland, Scottish Forestry, NatureScot, Crown Estate Scotland, Scottish Land Commission, Historic Environment Scotland, the national park authorities and others.

The Government has not yet published an authoritative final list of the organisations to be included in that consolidation exercise.

The local-governance proposal also leaves open the possibility that some functions currently within national public bodies could move into regional or local democratic control.

It does not identify which land-management functions, if any, would do so.

Shared Corporate Government Already Exists

The proposed institutional changes are only one layer of the reform.

A second layer already exists underneath a substantial number of organisations.

On 1 October 2024, the Scottish Government implemented Oracle Cloud for its own corporate administration and for 32 other public-sector organisations.

The shared service covers corporate functions including human resources, finance and payroll.

The Scottish Government supplied the full list in a 2025 Freedom of Information response.

The 32 Organisations Using the Scottish Government Oracle Cloud Shared Service

No.

Organisation

1

Accountant in Bankruptcy

2

Boundaries Scotland

3

Community Justice Scotland

4

Consumer Scotland

5

Crofting Commission

6

Disclosure Scotland

7

Education Scotland

8

Environmental Standards Scotland

9

Food Standards Scotland

10

Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

11

National Records of Scotland

12

Office of the Advocate General for Scotland

13

Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator

14

Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland

15

Parole Board for Scotland

16

Police Investigations and Review Commissioner

17

Redress Scotland

18

Revenue Scotland

19

Risk Management Authority

20

Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service

21

Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission

22

Scottish Fiscal Commission

23

Scottish Housing Regulator

24

Scottish Law Commission

25

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

26

Scottish Public Pensions Agency

27

Scottish Road Works Commissioner

28

Scottish Social Services Council

29

Care Inspectorate

30

Social Security Scotland

31

Student Awards Agency Scotland

32

Transport Scotland

The significance of this arrangement is not that those organisations have become one organisation.

They have not.

It shows instead that institutional independence and administrative independence are different things.

Separate bodies can retain different statutory powers, boards and accountability arrangements while sharing the same underlying corporate platform.

That separation becomes particularly relevant under the Government's new local-authority proposal.

The 21 September model envisages community and regional authorities having different decision-making responsibilities while relying upon the same regional administrative and corporate structure.

The Programme for Government also proposes further consolidation of functions including estates and procurement and says public-sector payments, call handling and shared services will be examined for further simplification.

The Named Digital and Data Infrastructure

The phrase “multiple public-service data systems” conceals a more detailed architecture.

Several distinct systems and common digital components are being developed or expanded.

They perform different functions and should not be treated as one database.

System or programme

Function

ScotAccount

Common Scottish Government account and digital identity-verification capability

ScotGov App

Planned common entry point through which citizens can engage with multiple government services

Digital Mailbox

Secure digital correspondence from public services

ScotPayments

Shared payments capability

ePass

Common approach for services including licences, permits, casework and related functions

Data Exchange

Infrastructure intended to make data held by one organisation available to another under privacy and security controls

“Tell us once”

Service-design policy intended to reduce repeated provision of the same information across public services

Shared data definitions and datasets

Standardisation intended to enable greater reuse of information across organisations

MyCare.scot

National digital health and social-care service

Digital Health and Care Record

Planned integrated digital health and care record

Oracle Cloud shared service

Common corporate HR, finance and payroll infrastructure rather than a citizen-service database

Scottish Government digital-service material identifies ScotAccount, Digital Mailbox, ScotPayments and ePass as reusable common components.

The Programme for Government adds the ScotGov App, Data Exchange, shared datasets and “tell us once” to the current reform programme.

MyCare.scot is being built using common capabilities including ScotAccount and Digital Mailbox and is intended over time to provide access to integrated health and social-care information.

These systems should not be described as one consolidated Scottish database.

The published architecture is more complicated.

The Government is, however, explicitly seeking greater interoperability and reuse.

Data Exchange is described as making data held by one organisation available to other organisations while protecting privacy and security.

“Tell us once” is intended to reduce the number of occasions on which people must provide the same information to different public services.

That is a different form of consolidation from formally merging institutions.

The Entire National Public-Body Landscape

The phrase “more than 130 public bodies” is difficult to interpret without seeing the names.

The following is the national directory maintained by the Scottish Government and updated on 16 September 2026.

The directory divides the landscape into formal categories.

The list does not mean every organisation has been selected for merger.

The Government has named some bodies for specific action and has separately committed to reviewing remaining public bodies for efficiency, joint working or possible merger.

Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies

No.

Organisation

1

Accounts Commission for Scotland

2

Architecture and Design Scotland

3

Bòrd na Gàidhlig

4

Cairngorms National Park Authority

5

Care Inspectorate

6

Children's Hearings Scotland

7

Community Justice Scotland

8

Creative Scotland

9

Crofting Commission

10

David MacBrayne Ltd

11

Ferguson Marine (Port Glasgow) Holdings Ltd

12

Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd

13

Highlands and Islands Enterprise

14

Historic Environment Scotland

15

Independent Living Fund Scotland

16

Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority

17

National Galleries of Scotland

18

National Library of Scotland

19

National Museums Scotland

20

NatureScot

21

Police Investigations and Review Commissioner

22

Qualifications Scotland

23

Quality Meat Scotland

24

Redress Scotland

25

Risk Management Authority

26

Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

27

Scottish Agricultural Wages Board

28

Scottish Canals

29

Scottish Children's Reporter Administration

30

Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission

31

Scottish Enterprise

32

Scottish Environment Protection Agency — SEPA

33

Scottish Food Commission

34

Scottish Funding Council

35

Scottish Futures Trust

36

Scottish Land Commission

37

Scottish Legal Aid Board

38

Scottish Legal Complaints Commission

39

Scottish National Investment Bank

40

Scottish Rail Holdings Ltd

41

Scottish Social Services Council

42

Skills Development Scotland

43

South of Scotland Enterprise

44

sportscotland

45

VisitScotland

46

Water Industry Commission for Scotland

47

Zero Waste Scotland

Advisory Non-Departmental Public Bodies

No.

Organisation

1

Boundaries Scotland

2

Judicial Appointments Board for Scotland

3

Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland

4

National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board

5

Poverty and Inequality Commission

6

Scottish Advisory Committee on Distinction Awards

7

Scottish Commission on Social Security

8

Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel

9

Scottish Law Commission

Public Corporations

No.

Organisation

1

Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd

2

Glasgow Prestwick Airport

3

Scottish Water

4

Crown Estate Scotland

Health Bodies

No.

Organisation

1

NHS Ayrshire & Arran

2

NHS Borders

3

NHS Dumfries & Galloway

4

NHS Fife

5

NHS Forth Valley

6

NHS Grampian

7

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

8

NHS Highland

9

NHS Lanarkshire

10

NHS Lothian

11

NHS Orkney

12

NHS Shetland

13

NHS Tayside

14

NHS Western Isles

15

Healthcare Improvement Scotland

16

Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland

17

National Waiting Times Centre Board / NHS Golden Jubilee

18

NHS 24

19

Public Health Scotland

20

Public Services Delivery Scotland

21

Scottish Ambulance Service Board

22

State Hospital Board for Scotland

Executive Agencies

No.

Organisation

1

Accountant in Bankruptcy

2

Disclosure Scotland

3

Education Scotland

4

Forestry and Land Scotland

5

National Social Work Agency

6

Scottish Forestry

7

Scottish Prison Service

8

Scottish Public Pensions Agency

9

Social Security Scotland

10

Student Awards Agency Scotland

11

Transport Scotland

Non-Ministerial Offices

No.

Organisation

1

Consumer Scotland

2

Environmental Standards Scotland

3

Food Standards Scotland

4

National Records of Scotland

5

Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator

6

Registers of Scotland

7

Revenue Scotland

8

Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service

9

Scottish Fiscal Commission

10

Scottish Housing Regulator

Commissioners and Ombudsmen

No.

Organisation

1

Ethical Standards Commissioner

2

Patient Safety Commissioner

3

Scottish Biometrics Commissioner

4

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People

5

Scottish Human Rights Commission

6

Scottish Information Commissioner

7

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

8

Standards Commission for Scotland

Other Significant National Bodies

No.

Organisation

1

Audit Scotland

2

Convener of School Closure Review Panels

3

Court of Lord Lyon

4

Drinking Water Quality Regulator

5

HM Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland

6

HM Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland

7

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in Scotland

8

HM Chief Inspector of Prosecution in Scotland

9

HM Fire Service Inspectorate in Scotland

10

Justices of the Peace Advisory Committees — six committees

11

King's Printer for Scotland

12

Police Negotiating Board for Scotland

13

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

14

Scottish Police Authority

15

Scottish Pubs Code Adjudicator

16

Scottish Road Works Commissioner

The six separate Justices of the Peace Advisory Committees mean that a simple count of headings does not necessarily produce the same number as a count of organisations.

That is one reason the Government generally describes the landscape as containing “more than 130” public bodies rather than relying on one static total.

The directory is also changing while the wider reform proceeds.

Qualifications Scotland replaced the Scottish Qualifications Authority in February 2026. Public Services Delivery Scotland replaced NHS Education for Scotland and NHS National Services Scotland. The Scottish Food Commission was added in September.

The First-tier Tribunal for Scotland and Upper Tribunal for Scotland were removed from the directory on 3 September because they are judicial bodies supported by the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service.

The 21 September proposal creates a further possible route for functions to move without necessarily appearing as a straightforward merger.

The Government says responsibilities presently exercised by national public bodies could in some cases move into regional or local democratic structures.

It has not yet identified a comprehensive list of those functions.

What Happens to the Jobs?

The organisational changes sit inside a wider programme to reduce corporate expenditure and change the public-sector workforce.

The Public Service Reform Strategy sets a target to reduce annualised Scottish Government and public-body corporate costs by £1 billion over five years.

The workstreams contributing to that target include workforce change, shared services, digital resources, intelligent automation, national collaborative procurement and the Scottish Single Estate.

That does not establish how many jobs will be lost or relocated in Inverness, Dundee, Glasgow, Stirling, Kirkwall, Lerwick, Stornoway, Aberdeen, Dumfries or elsewhere.

Nor does the Government’s local-governance paper provide a geographical workforce plan.

It does, however, make clear that reducing “backroom duplication” is part of the proposed regional and community model and that the same regional corporate structure would support both levels.

The distinction between operational and corporate employment will therefore matter.

Environmental regulation still requires environmental officers. Ferries still require crews and operational support. Hospitals still require clinical staff. Public records still require custodianship.

The functions explicitly targeted for greater sharing or efficiency include finance, human resources, payroll, procurement, estates, administration and technology.

The Government has not published a body-by-body staffing consequence for the September restructuring.

Ministers have also told Parliament that there are no plans for compulsory redundancies.

That does not determine the eventual headcount. Workforce numbers can change through turnover, vacancy controls, redeployment, organisational redesign and decisions not to refill posts.

The Missing Workforce Map

Question

Position at September 2026

Is workforce change part of reform?

Yes

Are mergers part of the programme?

Yes

Are shared corporate services part of it?

Yes

Is automation part of it?

Yes

Is there a financial target?

Yes — £1 billion reduction in annualised corporate costs over five years

Has a body-by-body job-loss figure been published?

No comprehensive figure located

Has Government published the number of NHS administrative posts that will remain after 14 boards become two?

Not yet

Have the headquarters of the two strategic health boards been announced?

Not yet

Has the headquarters of the proposed environmental body been announced?

Not yet

Have the headquarters of the proposed regional authorities been announced?

No — regions have not yet been geographically defined

Has a Scotland-wide list of public offices to be closed been published?

No

Has Government said where consolidated HR, finance, procurement and payroll work will be located?

No comprehensive geographical plan has been published

Does a merger automatically mean operational jobs disappear?

No

Has Government announced compulsory redundancies?

Ministers say there are no plans for compulsory redundancies

Can workforce numbers fall without compulsory redundancies?

Yes, including through turnover, vacancy controls, redeployment and organisational redesign

Local Employment Matters

Public bodies are not only lines on an administrative chart.

They are employers distributed around Scotland.

Bòrd na Gàidhlig, NatureScot, the Crofting Commission, Forestry and Land Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise have important employment presences in Inverness.

Food Standards Scotland is based in Aberdeen.

The Care Inspectorate and Scottish Social Services Council are based in Dundee.

The Scottish Public Pensions Agency is based at Tweedbank in the Borders.

Transport Scotland is headquartered in Glasgow.

The Scottish Land Commission is based at Inverness Campus.

South of Scotland Enterprise is based at the Crichton in Dumfries.

The territorial health boards maintain administrative employment throughout Scotland, including Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles.

A national merger does not necessarily mean that those jobs move.

An organisation can combine senior management or corporate services while leaving operational staff in existing locations.

It can also remove duplicated corporate teams, redesign posts or move functions into a smaller number of

administrative structures.

The new local-government proposal adds another possibility.

Administrative functions currently maintained separately by 32 councils could, under the proposed model, operate through six to ten regional corporate structures while decisions on specified local matters are taken through 120 to 160 community authorities.

That is not yet an announced staffing plan.

The Government has not said where those regional administrative centres would be located, how existing council workforces would transfer, or which functions would remain physically based in existing council areas.

It has therefore still not published a Scotland-wide geographical workforce plan showing which functions will remain local, which will become regional, which will become national and where the resulting teams will work.

Before and After

The direction of reform can now be described more precisely:

Scotland today

Announced or proposed direction

14 territorial NHS boards

2 strategic health boards

8 current national/special health bodies

Further reduction in special boards

32 councils

Opening proposal for 6–10 regional authorities and 120–160 community authorities

Existing council wards

Councillors proposed to remain elected at ward level and sit on both community and regional authorities

Separate council corporate structures

Proposal for common regional administrative/corporate structures supporting both regional and community authorities

Current island councils and governance

Bespoke Island Single Authority Models to be explored

31 health and social-care integration areas

Future governance unresolved; all options for social care and social work to be considered alongside NHS and local-government restructuring

SEPA + NatureScot + Zero Waste Scotland + potentially Scottish Forestry

One overarching environmental body

Scottish Food Commission + Scottish Pubs Code Adjudicator + Food Standards Scotland

Functions consolidated within Food Standards Scotland

Architecture & Design Scotland

Embedded within More Homes Scotland

Transport Scotland as an executive agency

Transport Scotland inside core Scottish Government

Seven Regional Transport Partnerships

Functions explicitly within discussion about future regional authorities; final structure unresolved

Several remaining national transport bodies

Merger opportunities under review

CMAL + David MacBrayne + CalMac + government ferry functions

Single ferries body being explored

National Records of Scotland and Registers of Scotland

Reform activity; final model not specified

Eight commissioner/ombudsman bodies in the current directory

Consolidation to be considered with Parliament

Multiple inspectorates and scrutiny bodies

Rationalisation and integration under review

Separate national cultural institutions

Management simplification to be assessed

Multiple public-land organisations

Consolidation to be investigated

32 named organisations already using shared Oracle corporate infrastructure

Further expansion of shared functions envisaged

Separate citizen-service systems

ScotAccount, ScotGov App, Digital Mailbox, ScotPayments, ePass, Data Exchange, MyCare and other common components increasingly reused across services

Organisation-specific data holdings

Greater sharing and reuse through Data Exchange, shared datasets and “tell us once”

More than 130 national public bodies

Remaining bodies subject to review for efficiency, joint working or possible merger

The local-government row now requires the greatest caution.

The health-board reduction is an announced government policy.

The six-to-ten regional authorities and 120-to-160 community authorities are an opening proposition for negotiation rather than an enacted replacement structure.

The Government says the proposals do not represent its final views and expects more detailed proposals to emerge through discussions with Parliament, local authorities and communities.

The Outline Is Now Visible. The Final Map Is Not.

Before 21 September, the Government had provided a clear direction of travel but little institutional detail about what “regional local government” and stronger community governance would mean.

That has changed.

There is now an outline model.

It contains a national level, six to ten proposed strategic regional authorities and 120 to 160 proposed community authorities.

It describes dual membership by councillors, shared regional corporate structures, a statutory mechanism for downward devolution and possible separate island models.

It also identifies examples of functions that could operate at each level.

What Scotland still does not have is the final map.

There are no agreed regional boundaries.

There are no agreed community-authority boundaries.

There is no complete division of statutory responsibilities.

There is no final funding formula.

There is no agreed allocation of local or regional tax-raising powers.

There is no published transfer scheme showing which council staff, property, contracts, records, liabilities or assets would move to which successor authority.

The relationship between the new local-government model and the two strategic NHS boards has not been fully designed.

The future of the 31 health and social-care integration arrangements remains open.

The final position of Regional Transport Partnerships is unresolved.

The Government has not identified all functions that might move out of national public bodies and into regional or community democratic structures.

The employment geography is similarly unfinished.

If 14 health boards no longer require 14 separate sets of corporate functions, the Government has not shown where the replacement work will be located.

If environmental organisations operate beneath one structure, the Government has not said where that organisation will be headquartered or which existing offices will continue to perform corporate rather than operational functions.

If 32 councils are eventually replaced by six to ten regional authorities supported by common corporate structures, the Government has not said where those structures will be located or what happens to existing council headquarters and administrative employment.

If shared human resources, payroll, finance and procurement continue to expand, no Scotland-wide map shows which communities will retain that work.

The same applies to the digital layer.

Scotland already has 32 named organisations sharing the Oracle corporate platform.

ScotAccount, Digital Mailbox, ScotPayments and ePass are reusable common components.

The ScotGov App is intended to allow people to engage with multiple services through a common platform.

Data Exchange is intended to allow information held by one organisation to be made available to another under controlled arrangements.

MyCare.scot uses common infrastructure within health and social care.

None of those facts establishes that Scotland is creating a single database or transferring every public function into one organisation.

They do show that the reorganisation is occurring simultaneously at several levels.

Some national organisations are being merged or absorbed.

Some strategic responsibilities could move into larger regional authorities.

Some decisions could move down into much smaller community authorities.

Some functions currently held nationally could move into regional or local democratic control.

Corporate services are being shared.

Common digital components are being reused.

Data is intended to move more readily between services.

Automation forms part of the efficiency programme.

The result is not a simple movement from local administration to central administration.

The emerging model combines consolidation and decentralisation while increasing the amount of administrative and technological infrastructure shared between organisations.

The next stage will determine not simply how many names remain in the national public-body directory.

It will determine which institutions possess statutory power, which control the money and assets, who employs the staff, where records are held, which technology operates underneath them, where administrative jobs are based and how much practical authority exists at national, regional and community level once the new structure is built.

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ECONOMY | 21 September 2026

Scotland's Supermarket Promotions Change on 1 October

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-supermarket-promotions-change-on-1-october/>



New rules will restrict where some foods can be displayed and how they can be promoted, changing supermarket entrances, checkouts, aisle ends and online stores while leaving the products themselves on sale.

The familiar supermarket offer of buying several packets, bottles or boxes for less than their individual price will disappear from many products in Scotland from 1 October, when new rules governing the promotion and placement of foods high in fat, sugar or salt come into force.

The Food (Promotion and Placement) (Scotland)

Regulations 2025 will change both where qualifying products can appear inside larger shops and the types of promotional offers retailers can use to sell them. The restrictions extend online, meaning the effects will also be visible on supermarket websites and apps rather than ending at the shop door.

The rules do not ban sweets, crisps, cakes, breakfast cereals, pizzas, ice cream, sugary soft drinks or the other categories covered by the regulations. They do not impose maximum prices or prevent shops reducing the ordinary price of an individual product. Instead, they remove particular promotional techniques from products that both fall within specified categories and are classified as less healthy under the nutrient profiling system used by the regulations.

From 1 October, affected retailers will no longer be able to use promotions such as "buy one get one free", "three for two", "three for £10" or offers promising an additional quantity free where a qualifying high-fat, sugar or salt product is involved. The restriction can also apply where the promotion combines a restricted food with something outside the regulations. Scottish Government guidance gives the example of a newspaper offered with a chocolate bar free: where the chocolate falls within the regulated categories and nutritional threshold, describing it as free would make the promotion unlawful.

Ordinary price reductions remain possible because the regulations are directed at volume promotions rather than every form of discounting. A retailer can reduce the price of one qualifying item without requiring the customer to buy additional units. Meal deals are also outside the new restrictions, as are alcohol promotions, which are regulated through separate legislation.

The second major change concerns location. In qualifying stores with at least 185.8 square metres, or 2,000 square feet, of relevant floor space, restricted products will no longer be permitted in some of the positions retailers have traditionally used to attract attention. These include entrances, checkout areas and aisle ends. Equivalent restrictions apply to prominent parts of qualifying online stores, including locations designed to expose customers to products as they enter or complete a purchase.

The placement provisions are significant because supermarket merchandising has long been built around the

value of particular positions inside a shop. An aisle-end display is visible from more than one direction and does not require the customer to enter the aisle containing the product. Checkout displays capture customers who have already completed most of their shopping, while entrance displays reach almost everyone entering the premises. Under the new system, some of the foods most commonly associated with those locations will have to be moved elsewhere.

Not every retailer is affected. The main promotion restrictions apply to businesses with 50 or more employees that sell products falling within the regulations. Smaller businesses are therefore outside most of the regime. Location restrictions apply only to qualifying stores with at least 2,000 square feet of relevant sales area, providing another exemption for smaller premises.

There are further limits on the types of food covered. A product must be prepacked, belong to one of the categories listed in the regulations and be assessed as less healthy under the nutrient profiling model before the promotion restrictions apply. Loose bakery products and foods made and packed within the shop, for example, generally sit outside the main restrictions. The Scottish Government's public guidance uses fresh pizzas prepared and packed in a shop and loose pastries as examples of products not covered in the same way as qualifying prepacked equivalents.

The distinction means two foods that appear similar to customers may be treated differently depending on how they are produced and packaged. A prepacked cake that falls within a scheduled category and exceeds the nutritional threshold may be subject to restrictions while a loose product from an in-store bakery may not be. Retailers therefore have to identify not merely broad categories of food but the regulatory status of individual stock lines.

Restaurants, cafés and takeaways are largely outside the placement and volume-promotion regime. One provision reaches further into the hospitality sector: businesses with 50 or more employees can no longer offer free refills of qualifying soft drinks containing added sugar. That restriction applies even though the wider rules on supermarket display and multi-buy promotions do not generally apply to food prepared and sold in the out-of-home sector.

The regulations create practical work for retailers before the first customer encounters any difference on a shelf. Businesses must determine which products meet both the category and nutritional tests, alter promotional systems so prohibited offers do not appear, change store layouts where affected products currently occupy restricted positions, and ensure online shopping systems do not display them in prohibited digital locations.

On-pack promotions create another complication. Products are often manufactured for sale across Britain rather than specifically for Scotland, meaning packaging may already carry a printed multi-buy offer. Scottish guidance says qualifying retailers may continue selling such stock, but where a prohibited volume promotion appears on the packaging they must make clear that the offer is not available in Scotland.

The regulations are deliberately close to systems already operating elsewhere in Britain. Equivalent location and promotion restrictions have been introduced in England and Wales, and the Scottish Government says businesses favoured alignment during consultation because supermarket distribution, manufacturing and promotional systems commonly operate across the UK rather than within separate national supply chains.

There are nevertheless Scottish differences. Government implementation guidance notes, for example, that Scotland and Wales apply aisle-end restrictions to all aisle ends covered by the regulations rather than only those located beside principal customer routes.

The scale of implementation extends beyond the largest supermarket names. Scottish Government economic

analysis estimated in 2024 that around 5,500 retailers could potentially fall within the regulatory landscape, although individual obligations depend on employee numbers, store size, the products sold and the exemptions contained in the regulations.

The Government's business assessment recognises that the changes carry costs. Its central estimate for the final package put one-off transition costs at approximately £1.9 million, including familiarisation, product assessment and store planning, with recurring costs estimated at about £1.7 million a year. Those calculations are models rather than bills that individual businesses will necessarily experience, and the assessment describes the results as illustrative because retailers and manufacturers may change their behaviour once the system is operating.

The same modelling anticipates changes in commercial behaviour. Retailers can replace restricted foods in valuable entrance, checkout and aisle-end positions with products that are outside the regulations. Manufacturers can reformulate existing products or launch alternatives capable of passing the nutrient profiling test. The assessment also acknowledges that restricting multi-buy promotions removes one method by which suppliers and retailers compete on price and could affect the way new high-fat, sugar or salt products are introduced to the market.

Retail trade groups have spent much of this year preparing stores for implementation. The Scottish Grocers' Federation has produced compliance guidance for the sector and has previously raised concerns about the practical work involved in applying the system, particularly as retailers have to decide whether individual products fall within the regulatory definition rather than relying simply on familiar descriptions such as confectionery or snacks.

The Scottish Government's case for the restrictions is based on public health rather than retail regulation as an end in itself. Its assessment argues that prominent displays and volume offers increase purchases of foods that people had not intended to buy or encourage greater quantities to be purchased. The policy is intended to alter that environment without removing the products from sale.

Its economic assessment models the health and wider economic benefits over 25 years at between approximately £2 billion and £2.4 billion, principally through increased economic output, lower NHS and social-care costs and the modelled value of improved health. The central estimate is approximately £2.29 billion. Those figures are projections based on assumptions about how purchasing and calorie consumption change after the restrictions and should not be read as money that will automatically be saved.

The direct effect on shoppers will be easier to observe.

From October, the packet of sweets beside a supermarket till may be somewhere else. A qualifying soft drink may no longer be offered as two bottles for a reduced combined price. A supermarket website may stop placing particular products prominently as customers enter its digital store or reach the online checkout. Other foods will occupy the physical and digital spaces that become available.

At the same time, the same restricted products can remain on shelves and can still be sold at reduced individual prices. Smaller retailers remain largely outside the regime, while loose and freshly prepared foods can fall outside restrictions applying to prepacked equivalents.

Enforcement will sit primarily with Scotland's local authorities acting as food authorities. They will be able to use powers contained in the regulations and existing food legislation, including compliance notices, where qualifying businesses fail to meet the new requirements. Failure to comply can amount to an offence.

The rules arriving on 1 October therefore represent neither a prohibition on particular foods nor a general

regulation of supermarket prices. They alter the commercial mechanisms used to place and promote a defined group of products, transferring some of the most valuable promotional spaces in larger Scottish shops to other goods and removing multi-buy incentives from products that meet the statutory test.

What replaces them — in aisle ends, at checkouts and in the promotional budgets of manufacturers and supermarkets — will become visible when Scotland's retail shelves change next month.

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TRANSPORT | 21 September 2026

Air Traffic Control Failure at Prestwick Disrupts Flights Across Scotland

Read online: <https://modern.scot/air-traffic-control-failure-at-prestwick-disrupts-flights-a-cross-scotland/>



Flights across Scotland, Northern Ireland and northern England were delayed or cancelled after a technical failure at the Prestwick air traffic control centre, less than two weeks after a separate NATS system failure disrupted thousands of flights across the UK.

A technical failure at the air traffic control centre in Prestwick disrupted flights across Scotland on Monday morning, reducing the number of aircraft that could safely pass through controlled airspace and leaving delays and cancellations across airports from the

Highlands and Islands to Glasgow and Edinburgh.

National Air Traffic Services said engineers had been called to investigate a technical problem at its Prestwick centre early on 21 September. Traffic restrictions were imposed while the fault was examined, reducing the number of aircraft controllers were required to handle until normal systems could be restored. The problem was fixed by around 10.30am, but the effects continued after the technical failure itself had ended as airlines and airports worked through aircraft, crews and passengers displaced by the restrictions.

The incident affected far more than Prestwick Airport. The NATS centre at Prestwick is one of the two principal control centres through which the UK's controlled airspace is managed, alongside Swanwick in Hampshire. It handles air traffic across Scotland, northern parts of the UK and important sections of the North Atlantic system, meaning a technical problem inside the Ayrshire facility can quickly extend into airport schedules hundreds of miles away.

Edinburgh and Glasgow both recorded significant delays during the morning. The Highlands and Islands Airports network reported disruption across its airports, while services involving Dundee, Inverness, Islay, Kirkwall and other regional airports were affected. Loganair cancelled a number of services, including some island connections. Flights in Northern Ireland and northern England were also delayed, with Manchester and Belfast among the airports affected.

NATS applied air traffic regulations while engineers investigated the failure. Such restrictions reduce traffic demand so that controllers continue operating within the capacity available to them while a technical system is degraded. They are a safety measure rather than an indication that aircraft already in the air were placed in danger.

Airlines nevertheless faced immediate operational consequences. By later in the morning dozens of flights had been cancelled and many more delayed. Ryanair said tens of thousands of its passengers had been affected, while easyJet, Jet2 and British Airways were among the operators reporting disruption or criticising the reliability of the air traffic control system.

The interruption occurred at a particularly sensitive time for NATS. Only three days earlier, the organisation

published its preliminary report into a separate technical failure on 8 September which caused widespread disruption across the UK and led to around 2,000 flight cancellations.

NATS has said clearly that the Prestwick incident was unrelated to that earlier failure.

The 8 September event originated in a software defect affecting part of the National Airspace System used to process flight information. According to the preliminary investigation, a manual request for an aircraft identification code was interrupted by a higher-priority system activity. When the original request resumed, a defect in a small section of software caused it to restart incorrectly, corrupting information used by the wider system.

The sequence occurred within a millisecond.

Because controllers temporarily had less flight information available, restrictions were introduced across the UK while the system was restarted and data reloaded. The restrictions remained in place for around six hours and the resulting disruption continued for more than two days.

That failure principally affected the London Area Control operation rather than Prestwick. NATS said it had identified the defective code and introduced mitigation while a permanent repair underwent safety testing. Chief executive Martin Rolfe also said the incident was unrelated to the major NATS failure of August 2023 and rejected speculation that military activity had been responsible.

Monday's Prestwick fault therefore represents a separate technical event rather than a recurrence of the defect identified earlier this month. Its proximity to the previous failure has nevertheless renewed scrutiny of the resilience of the systems on which UK aviation depends.

EasyJet said the latest incident raised questions about the resilience of NATS systems and called for measures to prevent repeated failures. Jet2 chief executive Steve Heapy said passengers and airlines required greater accountability and resilience, while Ryanair again called for the departure of NATS chief executive Martin Rolfe. British Airways also expressed frustration at another technical fault.

Those are airline positions rather than findings about the cause of Monday's failure. NATS had not, by Monday afternoon, published a detailed technical explanation equivalent to the report produced for the 8 September incident. The company said the Prestwick problem had been fixed and that it was working with airports and airlines to lift traffic restrictions safely and limit further disruption.

Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander said engineers had restored the affected systems but warned that delays could continue while operations returned to normal.

The Prestwick centre forms part of infrastructure which is largely invisible to passengers until it ceases to operate normally. NATS manages around 2.5 million flights each year and controls aircraft through an interconnected system of radar, flight-data processing, communications networks and controller workstations. Its en-route operations are regulated by the Civil Aviation Authority, and NATS has been carrying out a long-term programme to replace ageing systems and move air traffic management onto newer technical infrastructure.

Prestwick itself has been part of that programme. NATS documents have previously described the introduction of new controller tools and workstations at the Ayrshire centre as part of a broader transformation of the systems supporting UK airspace. The company has said it has invested more than £1 billion in technology during the past decade and expects further major investment through the early 2030s.

The resilience of those systems has already been subjected to independent examination. The August 2023 air

traffic control failure disrupted more than 700,000 passengers and was estimated to have cost passengers and the aviation industry between £75 million and £100 million. An independent review subsequently produced 34 recommendations covering NATS, the Civil Aviation Authority, airlines, airports and government, including improvements to contingency planning, communications and consumer protection.

The most recent failures are technically different. The August 2023 event, the software defect of 8 September 2026 and Monday's Prestwick problem should not be treated as a single recurring fault without evidence connecting them. Each has involved different circumstances and NATS has specifically separated Monday's incident from the failure earlier this month.

For Scotland, however, the Prestwick disruption demonstrates the reach of a single point within the country's transport infrastructure. A technical problem inside an air traffic control centre in Ayrshire was sufficient to restrict departures from Scottish airports, interrupt island services and affect flights moving through northern British and North Atlantic airspace.

By late Monday morning the technical problem itself had been repaired. The outstanding question is what failed inside Prestwick, why the failure required traffic capacity to be reduced, what redundancy was available while engineers dealt with it, and whether the incident reveals anything that requires changes beyond the repair already completed.

NATS has yet to publish that technical account.

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ECONOMY | 21 September 2026

Inside the Digital Kiosks Moving Onto Scotland's Streets

Read online: <https://modern.scot/inside-the-digital-kiosks-moving-onto-scotlands-streets/>



Planning applications across Scotland describe communications kiosks equipped with defibrillators and advertising screens. Behind that description is a privately operated platform capable of combining telephony, public Wi-Fi, digital information, commercial advertising and mobile-network infrastructure.

On Wednesday, 23 September, West Lothian councillors will consider two planning disputes over structures proposed for town-centre pavements in Broxburn and Bathgate. In the council papers they are described

simply as digital communications kiosks incorporating a defibrillator and advertising display. One would stand on East Main Street in Broxburn and the other on George Street in Bathgate. Taken by themselves, the applications appear to concern modern replacements for traditional telephone boxes, supplemented by emergency equipment and a digital screen. The documents submitted by the company behind them show that the structures are part of something considerably broader.

New World Payphones is pursuing digital kiosk installations across several Scottish local authority areas, and its own planning material describes a platform capable of combining public telephony, an interactive touchscreen, local information and wayfinding, public Wi-Fi, a defibrillator, digital advertising and equipment capable of hosting small-cell mobile telecommunications infrastructure. Similar proposals have appeared in West Lothian, Midlothian, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and South Lanarkshire, placing individual decisions about street furniture within a wider programme of privately operated digital infrastructure being introduced through Scotland's planning system.

The clearest account of how the system works appears in documents submitted for proposed kiosks in Penicuik and Dalkeith. New World Payphones describes the communications equipment and advertising display as a single integrated scheme rather than two independent elements and states that commercial advertising provides essential funding for the modernisation and maintenance of the network. The arrangement is therefore more closely integrated than a telephone standing beside an unrelated poster site: the public communications functions and the commercial display form parts of the same operating model.

The Midlothian specification gives a detailed picture of the equipment. The public-facing side would contain a telephone capable of accepting card, contactless and cash payments, alongside an interactive touchscreen providing maps, local information and wayfinding. The structure can accommodate public Wi-Fi or small-cell telecommunications equipment and contains an automated external defibrillator. A digital advertising screen of approximately 1.6 metres by 0.9 metres occupies the reverse side, with advertisements changing at intervals of at least ten seconds and light sensors adjusting the screen according to surrounding conditions. The company proposes giving the council one free ten-second slot each hour for public information, emergency messages or local events.

The small-cell capability gives the structure a function less immediately apparent from its appearance on the pavement. New World Payphones says licensed infrastructure providers can install equipment within the kiosk where additional mobile capacity is required, allowing the structure to support 4G coverage and future 5G deployment. Small cells provide mobile-network capacity over shorter distances than conventional masts and can be used in busy urban areas where operators require more coverage without installing another large mast or cabinet. The planning documents establish that the kiosk has been designed to accommodate that equipment; they do not establish that every proposed Scottish kiosk will contain a small cell, and Modern Scot has found no evidence showing that such equipment is intended to be activated at the Broxburn or Bathgate sites.

The business behind the programme is also different from the traditional image of a payphone operator. New World Payphones operates through NWP Street Limited, which Companies House records show is controlled by Bauer Media Outdoor UK Limited. New World Payphones became part of the Clear Channel outdoor-advertising business in 2016 before Clear Channel's northern European operation was acquired by Bauer Media Group and became Bauer Media Outdoor. The kiosk programme therefore sits within a business whose wider activities include digital outdoor advertising, roadside displays, bus shelters, retail advertising and other forms of commercial street infrastructure.

Earlier this year Bauer said it intended to install more than 100 new communications kiosks equipped with defibrillators by the end of 2026. The programme was announced alongside expansion of the company's digital advertising estate, engineering operations and data capabilities. Bauer has said its first new defibrillator kiosk in Lewisham was used in an emergency within 48 hours of being installed, while planning material submitted in Scotland states that the defibrillators would be subject to regular checks and registered on The Circuit, the national network used by emergency services to identify publicly accessible equipment during cardiac arrests.

The emergency function is therefore not incidental. If a cardiac arrest occurs nearby, ambulance-service personnel can identify a registered unit and direct a caller to it. New World Payphones has described work with the Community Heartbeat Trust and Resuscitation Council UK as part of the programme. The result is an unusual combination: potentially life-saving emergency equipment housed within infrastructure whose continuing modernisation and maintenance are financed through commercial advertising.

That combination is now appearing repeatedly in Scottish planning records. West Lothian has considered proposals in Broxburn, Bathgate, Whitburn and Livingston, with planning permission for the physical structures and consent for the advertising displays dealt with separately. The Broxburn and Bathgate cases return to the council's Local Review Body on 23 September following refusal, while a Whitburn proposal has already gone through the review process. Midlothian has received applications for kiosks outside Penicuik Jobcentre and Morrisons in Dalkeith, and applications using the same general model have appeared in Dundee and South Lanarkshire.

Edinburgh has been dealing with New World Payphones proposals for several years. In February 2025 the council refused applications at Frederick Street and South Charlotte Street, with further advertising applications following. Some of the proposed sites lie within conservation areas and the city's World Heritage Site, bringing questions of illuminated advertising, street clutter and the character of historic streets into the same planning process as telecommunications infrastructure. Glasgow has also considered New World Payphones proposals, including a kiosk near Jamaica Street and Clyde Street, where material submitted during the planning process described the project as part of a wider programme to rationalise and modernise the company's communications estate in the city.

The relationship between telecommunications and advertising within these structures has been tested

before. In 2019 New World Payphones reached the Court of Appeal in England following a dispute with Westminster City Council over the planning status of its kiosks. The technical description recorded by the court included public Wi-Fi, small-cell telecommunications equipment, near-field communication, Bluetooth technology and a large digital advertising screen. The dispute concerned whether a structure serving both telecommunications and advertising purposes could rely upon planning rights intended for telecommunications development. The Court of Appeal concluded, under the English rules applying to that case, that the advertising function could not simply acquire the planning status of telecommunications equipment. The judgment does not determine Scottish applications, which are considered under Scotland's own planning regime, but it provides a documented account of the broader technological functions that have formed part of the company's kiosk design.

A separate question concerns the wider digital capabilities of Bauer Media Outdoor. Its current UK commercial privacy notice applies across an advertising estate that includes phone kiosks, bus shelters, billboards and free-standing digital panels. The company states that some of its structures carry Wi-Fi sensors capable of detecting devices searching for wireless networks. Bauer says raw device identifiers are not retained and that hashed identifiers are used to produce anonymised and aggregated audience counts. Its privacy documentation also says Bluetooth beacons operate at a small number of sites and that cameras or CCTV are used on some advertising structures for security, safety or confirmation that advertisements have been displayed. Bauer also describes the use of audience-measurement partners and aggregated information concerning movement around advertising locations.

Those disclosures establish capabilities within Bauer's wider estate; they do not establish that the kiosks proposed in West Lothian, Midlothian or elsewhere in Scotland contain those systems. There is no evidence in the planning material examined by Modern Scot showing that the Broxburn or Bathgate kiosks would contain Wi-Fi detection sensors, Bluetooth advertising beacons, cameras or computer-vision equipment. Public Wi-Fi provision should not itself be confused with passive detection of nearby devices. They are technically and legally different functions.

The planning application title reveals relatively little about the final specification of the equipment. A structure can be designed to accommodate telecommunications hardware without that hardware being installed, just as technologies described in a parent company's privacy policy may operate elsewhere in its advertising estate without being present at a particular Scottish site. Establishing precisely how an individual kiosk operates requires its final hardware specification, network configuration and any data-protection documentation attached to the installation.

The commercial arrangements are similarly difficult to establish from planning papers alone. New World Payphones says the kiosks are supplied and maintained without charge to councils and that advertising income supports the network. The documents do not necessarily show who pays for electricity and fixed communications connections, whether the operator pays for occupation of the pavement, whether councils receive a share of advertising income, what a mobile-network provider would pay to install small-cell equipment, or what becomes of the structures if the advertising business supporting them changes.

New World Payphones describes itself in planning material as an Electronic Communications Code operator and says it manages a national network of approximately 2,000 communications kiosks. Electronic Communications Code status can give telecommunications operators statutory rights relating to the installation and maintenance of network apparatus. For councils, the result is a structure sitting at the intersection of planning law, roads legislation, telecommunications regulation and advertising control rather than an ordinary piece of commercial street furniture.

The technologies themselves are not novel when considered separately. Public telephones have occupied

Scottish pavements for generations. Digital advertising screens are widespread. Mobile telecommunications equipment is increasingly embedded in streets and buildings. Public Wi-Fi is routine, while publicly accessible defibrillators are now installed in shops, stations, community buildings and other locations across the country. The change lies in the consolidation of several of those functions within one privately operated structure whose commercial and communications uses are interdependent.

For local planning authorities, however, the applications continue to arrive one location at a time. Councillors and planning officers are asked to consider dimensions, pedestrian movement, illuminated advertising, road safety, conservation areas and the visual effect of a structure at a particular address. The planning trail across Scotland shows that those individual structures form part of a much larger deployment.

Bauer Media Outdoor says more than 100 new communications kiosks with defibrillators are intended to be installed across the UK during 2026. Scottish planning records already show the model moving through local authority systems in West Lothian, Midlothian, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and South Lanarkshire. The applications establish that the platform can combine public communications, digital advertising, emergency equipment and additional telecommunications infrastructure. They do not, in every case, disclose the final hardware installed, the functions that will be activated, the data systems that will operate at the site or the detailed commercial arrangements governing the equipment.

When West Lothian's Local Review Body considers the Broxburn and Bathgate applications on Wednesday, the formal question before councillors will concern two individual structures on two individual pavements. The documents surrounding them show that those structures belong to a considerably larger network whose precise technical and commercial configuration is not always visible from the planning description attached to it.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 21 September 2026

How an Anglo-Saxon Coin Reached the Edge of the Norse World

Read online: <https://modern.scot/how-an-anglo-saxon-coin-reached-the-edge-of-the-norse-world>

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The Shetland discovery comes from an eroding coastal site already yielding evidence from the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Norse periods. Its precise ruler and mint have not yet been published, but earlier finds show English silver travelling deep into the Scandinavian world of the Northern Isles.

An Anglo-Saxon coin discovered at Gletness in Shetland has been identified by Archaeology Shetland as the northernmost example yet found in the United Kingdom, extending the known geographical reach of such coinage

farther into the North Atlantic than previous recorded finds.

The coin was recovered at Gletness in the parish of Nesting on the east side of Mainland Shetland, at a coastal archaeological landscape where remains spanning thousands of years are being progressively exposed by erosion. Its detailed numismatic identification — including the ruler under whom it was struck, its mint, moneyer and precise coin type — has not yet been published. Those details will ultimately determine whether the object belongs to the period of established Norse settlement in Shetland or represents something earlier and considerably more unusual.

The absence of that identification is significant because an Anglo-Saxon coin can often be dated much more closely than the stone buildings and occupation deposits around it. Later Anglo-Saxon pennies commonly carry the king's name and, on the reverse, information identifying the moneyer responsible for striking the coin and frequently the mint where it was produced. A sufficiently preserved specimen can therefore sometimes be placed not simply within a century but within a particular reign, issue and monetary system.

What is already known about Gletness gives the discovery an unusually rich archaeological setting.

The stretch of shoreline was investigated in detail in 2025 by the SCAPE Trust and Archaeology Shetland after years of monitoring increasingly vulnerable remains. Trial excavation and recording between 29 May and 3 June examined both a suspected Bronze Age burnt mound and an eroding settlement represented by drystone structures at the coast edge. The work was undertaken because active erosion was damaging archaeology that researchers and landowners had watched for more than a decade.

The western part of the investigation confirmed a complex burnt mound containing large paving slabs, extensive deposits of heat-cracked stone and a corbelled subterranean structure holding a waterlogged deposit, interpreted by the excavators as a possible well. Burnt mounds are generally associated with the Bronze Age and the repeated heating of stones before their immersion in water, although the exact activities carried out at such sites remain debated.

Farther east, excavation and cleaning of the exposed coastal section revealed foundations belonging to one or

more substantial Iron Age structures. Pottery recovered from occupation and demolition deposits was considered likely to be Middle to Late Iron Age in date. The surviving mound was composed largely of truncated stone walls, tumble and occupation material containing peat ash, charcoal, shell, animal bone and pottery.

Immediately offshore are the fragmentary remains of what is recorded as a possible broch on the small islet of Litolom. The relationship between land and water there has changed markedly. Research used in the Gletness project estimates that relative sea level in Shetland was between 1.2 and 2.9 metres lower around 2,000 years ago. The feature now separated from the settlement by water would during the Iron Age have occupied a small headland on the side of a bay, with the settlement behind it.

The Bronze Age landscape would have looked different again. The Gletness report estimates that the coastline may then have lain between 150 and 300 metres farther seaward than it does today. What is now a line of small islands and tidal water formed part of a much broader low-lying coastal landscape.

The site did not cease to accumulate evidence after the Iron Age. Finds previously recovered from around Vardasta at Gletness include saddle and rotary querns and a Viking or Norse comb. Medieval and later pottery has been recovered from the foreshore, while the 2025 excavation found a Norse-type net sinker in the upper deposits. The excavators described the evidence for Norse-age and later activity as slight and cautioned that the upper levels are disturbed, containing a mixture of prehistoric, Norse and modern material.

That caution is important when considering the new coin. Its presence cannot by itself demonstrate that Anglo-Saxons lived at Gletness, nor would an English coin establish English political control of Shetland. Coins could travel very considerable distances from the authorities and mints that produced them, and the Northern Isles were deeply connected to Scandinavian networks during the Viking Age.

In Anglo-Saxon England, a penny was part of a controlled monetary system in which its official type, weight and silver content mattered. In Scandinavian Scotland, silver could operate differently. Archaeological research into Viking and Norse exchange shows that metal was frequently valued according to weight and purity rather than solely according to the monetary authority stamped on it. Coins could circulate alongside silver ornaments and ingots and could themselves be treated as pieces of valuable metal.

That distinction offers one explanation for the presence of English money so far north. A coin bearing the name of an English king did not have to remain within an English monetary economy. Once carried into Scandinavian networks, its silver could be useful whether it remained intact, was accumulated in a hoard, exchanged as bullion or eventually cut into smaller pieces.

Shetland already has important evidence of precisely this movement of Anglo-Saxon coinage into a Norse environment.

At Old Scatness in the South Mainland, archaeologists recovered a silver coin of King Æthelstan, whose reign ran from 924 to 939. Research on the excavation records the coin as having been minted at Chester or York and considers it likely to have remained in circulation between about 930 and 970. It came from a distinctive deposit overlying earlier Pictish structures during a period in which the character of the settlement was changing. By the end of the tenth century, Old Scatness was clearly Scandinavian in character.

Æthelstan is an especially significant ruler in the history of English coinage. His reign accompanied the consolidation of a kingdom extending across much of what became England, and his coins travelled beyond the political territory from which they originated. The Old Scatness penny is direct evidence that one of them reached Shetland.

Another Anglo-Saxon penny was found at Jarlshof, also in the South Mainland. The established numismatic record identifies it as a First Hand type of Æthelred II, struck at York. Æthelred reigned from 978 to 1016, apart from the brief interruption of his rule in 1013–14, during one of the most intense periods of Scandinavian military activity and movement of silver between England and the Viking world.

The Jarlshof coin was not an isolated indication of English money reaching Shetland. In 1830 a major silver discovery was made at Quendale in Dunrossness, subsequently referred to under several names including Garthsbanks. Nineteenth-century descriptions record a horn containing Anglo-Saxon coins accompanied by silver arm-rings. Later numismatic work indicates that the coin element extended across a long chronological range, from Æthelstan through later tenth-century rulers and into the reign of Æthelred II.

Only a small part of that coin assemblage survives in identifiable form, and early accounts of the circumstances are imperfect. Even so, the chronological spread of the Quendale material suggests that English pennies had been reaching Shetland across much of the tenth century rather than through a single isolated event.

Together, Old Scatness, Jarlshof and Quendale establish an important point about the Gletness discovery. It is not the first Anglo-Saxon coin to reach Shetland. What appears to make it exceptional is where within Shetland it was found.

The principal earlier examples lie around Dunrossness in the far south of Mainland. Gletness is much farther north, in Nesting, at approximately 60 degrees north. The difference in latitude places the new discovery roughly 40 kilometres north of the well-documented Old Scatness and Jarlshof finds. Archaeology Shetland's description of the coin as the northernmost Anglo-Saxon example yet found in the UK therefore represents a geographical extension of an already established pattern rather than the first evidence of this coinage in the islands.

The earlier finds also provide a basis for considering the likely age of the unidentified Gletness coin, although they cannot identify it.

The strongest working possibility is a silver penny of the tenth or early eleventh century: broadly the period represented by the Æthelstan coin at Old Scatness, the Æthelred penny at Jarlshof and the Anglo-Saxon component of the Quendale hoard. Such a date would fit an established archaeological pattern in which English silver moved into Scandinavian Scotland during the Viking Age.

It remains an inference, not an identification.

There is a much more unusual alternative. If the Gletness object proved to be one of the earlier Anglo-Saxon silver coinages of the seventh, eighth or ninth centuries, its historical implications would be different. Earlier Anglo-Saxon coins are rare in northern Scotland, and a genuinely pre-Viking example from Shetland would require the geographical and chronological evidence to be reconsidered well beyond the already remarkable northern location of the find.

Nothing yet published about the Gletness coin justifies that conclusion. Until the object has been formally identified, the tenth-century Viking-age context remains the more conservative hypothesis because it fits both the known Shetland coin record and the evidence for later activity at Gletness.

Even if that hypothesis proves correct, the eventual identification could reveal considerably more. A king's portrait and inscription can establish the issuing authority; the reverse legend may identify a moneyer and mint. Different designs were introduced as English rulers periodically changed their coinage, giving numismatists another means of narrowing the date. Wear can indicate that a coin remained in use for some

time after striking, while its archaeological context may establish whether it was lost during occupation, deliberately deposited or moved from its original layer by later disturbance.

The mint could also alter the geographical story. York would provide an obvious connection with a major northern English centre deeply entangled with the Scandinavian world during the tenth century. A coin from a southern or western English mint would demonstrate a longer monetary journey before it reached Shetland. The Quendale material already shows that Shetland's connections were capable of drawing silver from a wide monetary geography.

Single coins and hoards answer different archaeological questions. A hoard such as Quendale represents the deliberate accumulation of wealth and may contain material gathered over decades. A solitary coin can represent something much more immediate: an object carried, handled and eventually dropped or deposited at a particular settlement. Its value as evidence depends heavily on knowing exactly where and within what archaeological layer it was found.

That makes the continuing work at Gletness important beyond the coin itself. The coastline is actively removing the context in which such objects survive. The 2025 excavation was undertaken because structures that had persisted for centuries were becoming increasingly exposed and truncated by the sea. Artefacts recovered from the foreshore include material from widely separated periods because erosion is cutting through deposits that accumulated over a very long span of occupation.

At Gletness, the sea is consequently doing two contradictory things: revealing archaeology and destroying the relationships between objects, buildings and layers that allow archaeologists to understand it. A coin recovered in isolation can identify a date and ruler; a coin securely related to a floor, midden, demolition layer or structure can say considerably more about the people who possessed it.

The discovery therefore adds two records to the same piece of shoreline. It extends the known northern distribution of Anglo-Saxon coinage in the UK while adding another fragment to a Gletness landscape that already contains Bronze Age activity, substantial Iron Age occupation and evidence of a later Norse presence.

The remaining questions are unusually precise. The ruler has yet to be publicly identified. So have the mint, moneyer and coin type. Its exact date, condition and archaeological context have not yet been fully published.

When those details emerge, they should reveal whether the newest object from Gletness belongs to the same tenth- and early eleventh-century flow of English silver already documented elsewhere in Shetland, or whether a very small coin has pushed the history of contact with the islands farther back as well as farther north.

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HERITAGE AND ARTS | 21 September 2026

Scotland's Forgotten Dead: The Strange Things the Records Say Really Happened

Read online: <https://modern.scot/scotlands-forgotten-dead-the-strange-things-the-records-say-really-happened/>



Long before Scotland's haunted castles became visitor attractions, ministers, doctors, judges, councils and ordinary families were recording something stranger: funeral parties racing to avoid leaving their dead as churchyard guardians, murder victims being made to "identify" their killers, bodies moved because fishermen believed they had driven away the herring, human remains used as medicine, graves opened before crowds and a family trying to restore life after an execution. Some of these things demonstrably happened. Others were beliefs reported by people who lived among them. The surviving records allow the two

to be separated — and what remains is often stranger than the folklore that followed.

The Last-Buried Dead Had to Guard the Churchyard Gate

Recorded 1799 | Aberdeenshire; preserved in the Monquhitter appendix to the Old Statistical Account

There was a problem at the churchyard gate. Two funeral parties had arrived on the same day, and neither particularly wished to be second. This was not impatience over the minister, the grave-digger or the lateness of the hour. According to an account published in Aberdeenshire in 1799, the difficulty lay with the dead themselves.

The belief was that the ghost of the person most recently buried had to keep watch at the churchyard gate until another death supplied a replacement. The Old Statistical Account put it rather more vividly: the unfortunate ghost was condemned to "porter it" until relieved by the next burial.

That transformed burial order into something more consequential than ceremony. When two funerals were due at the same churchyard on the same day, the account says both parties staggered forward as quickly as possible, each attempting to get its own dead into the earth first. If they met at the gate, the coffins could be put down while the living decided, by blows if necessary, which family would bury first and whose relative would inherit the unwanted supernatural duty.

There is an important geographical qualification. The story appears in the 1799 appendix for Monquhitter in the Old Statistical Account, but the wording itself says only that the custom existed "in one division of this county". It does not identify the particular churchyard. Monquhitter is therefore where the belief was recorded, not a proven identification of the burial ground in which the reported fight occurred.

John Gregorson Campbell later recorded the same underlying Highland belief under the Gaelic name *Faire Chlaidh*, the "watch of the graveyard". In his account, the last person buried remained on watch until the next funeral arrived. He also recorded that when two funeral parties reached a churchyard together, a fight could

break out over which coffin would be buried first. The idea had therefore survived well beyond a single eighteenth-century parish report.

The surviving records do not name the dead people whose funeral parties supposedly fought. They do not tell us who, in 1799, was imagined to be standing watch at the gate. That identity has disappeared.

Monquhitter Churchyard itself, however, continued in use long after the Statistical Account was written. The latest burial identifiable in publicly searchable online records is that of Bert Thom, formerly of Cuminestown, who died at Inverurie Hospital on 6 April 2010 aged 85. His funeral service was held in Monquhitter Parish Church on 13 April at 11am, followed by interment in the churchyard. He was the widower of Jess Wilson and father of Irene, Heather, Albert and Gary.

That does not establish that Bert Thom was the most recent person buried there. Monquhitter remains an active burial ground, and the council's internal burial register may contain later interments. Nor does the 1799 account prove that Monquhitter itself was the churchyard in which the porter belief was practised.

But if the old belief did belong to Monquhitter as well as the wider district, then the identity of the supposed "guard" would have changed every time another coffin entered the ground.

The ghost cannot be verified. The behaviour of the living, and the belief that produced it, can.

The Spanish Princess Who Had to Return for One Finger

Recorded in the Nineteenth Century | Kiel, or Cill Chaluim Chille, Morvern

John Gregorson Campbell preserved another version of the graveyard watch from Morvern, and this one carried with it a much older legend.

At Kiel, or Cill Chaluim Chille, a burial ground in Morvern, tradition said that a Spanish princess had once been interred. She was supposed to have been aboard one of the Armada vessels associated in folklore with the wreck or destruction of a ship in Tobermory Bay. The historical identity of this woman is not established; she belongs to local tradition rather than securely documented biography.

Two young men of the district, Campbell recorded, made a pact that whichever of them died first would have his graveyard watch kept by the survivor. One died, and the surviving man honoured the agreement.

While keeping watch he was said to acquire the ability to see both the ordinary world and the spirits moving through the churchyard. Each night he watched the ghosts leave the burial ground and return before morning. One spirit was always behind the others.

He eventually spoke to her.

According to the tradition, the lagging ghost was the Spanish princess. Her body, the story said, had later been taken back to Spain, but one little finger had been left behind in the Morvern grave. Because that fragment of her body remained at Kiel, her spirit was still obliged to return.

There is no documentary evidence that a Spanish princess was removed from this graveyard and repatriated to Spain, leaving a finger behind. Campbell presented the story as tradition.

Its interest lies in the logic of the belief. A whole body did not have to remain in the earth for a place to retain its claim on the dead. One finger was enough.

The Dead Man Who Asked to Have His Own Head Cut Off

Story Set in the Mid-Eighteenth Century; Recorded 1845 | Glencoe, preserved in the New Statistical Account for Laggan

Almost half a century after the Monquhitter account was published, another Statistical Account preserved something considerably stranger.

The New Statistical Account for Laggan, published in 1845, recorded a story said to belong to about the middle of the previous century. Its action was placed in Glencoe. A man had died and been buried “in the island”; neither his name nor the precise burial place was preserved in the printed account.

For several nights afterwards, according to the minister’s record, the dead man disturbed the neighbourhood by calling in a miserable voice for one particular person to come and relieve him. Eventually the man being summoned set out for the burial place during what the account called the dead hour of night.

There he supposedly found the corpse with its head and neck protruding above the ground.

The visitor demanded to know why the dead man was disturbing everyone. The answer concerned an oath made while alive. The corpse explained that in his younger days he had solemnly sworn to marry a particular woman and never forsake her for as long as his head remained on his body.

At the time he made the promise, however, he had been holding a button. Afterwards he broke the head of the button from its neck and persuaded himself that the wording of his vow had therefore been defeated.

Death, the story said, exposed the flaw.

The dead man told his visitor that he had been unable to rest day or night and would remain so as long as his actual head was attached to his body. He therefore asked the living man to cut it off.

The visitor was said to have struck through the neck close to the surface of the ground. The body then dragged itself back into the grave, leaving the severed head behind to “shift for itself”.

There is no surviving name for the deceased, no identifiable grave and no independent evidence that any such encounter occurred. The real historical resolution comes in the final sentence of the 1845 account. The minister wrote that some people in Glencoe still believed the story as firmly as they believed religious truth.

The corpse cannot be verified. The survival of the belief can.

Water and Milk Were Left for the Returning Dead

Nineteenth Century | Highlands and Islands, including Mull and Tiree

Not every belief about returning dead involved terror. Some were almost domestic.

John Gregorson Campbell recorded that after a corpse had been placed in its coffin and carried away for burial, the boards on which it had previously lain could be left undisturbed for the night. A drink of water would be placed on them in case the dead person returned thirsty. In some places, water or milk was left outside the door instead.

The same household might simultaneously take precautions against allowing the dead inside. In Mull and Tiree a sprig of pearlswort could be fixed above the lintel, a protective measure intended to keep the returning dead from entering the house.

There is no contradiction if the beliefs are understood on their own terms. A dead relative might deserve water and still not be wanted back inside the home. Hospitality and protection could exist side by side.

The collectors did not preserve the names of the households that did this. There is no known widow whose cup was later discovered empty and no identified cottage in which a deceased relative was reported drinking from the water left overnight.

What survives is the practice itself. For some families, burial did not immediately end the duties owed to the dead.

Even the dead might still need a drink.

The Shroud String That Could Bring the Dead Home

Nineteenth-Century Tradition | Highlands

The dead also had to be prepared correctly.

Campbell recorded the custom of cutting every string in the shroud before the corpse was finally placed in its coffin. The explanation attached to the practice involved a woman who, after burial, was said to have appeared to her friends and complained that not all the strings had been cut.

Her grave was supposedly opened.

According to the tradition, one fastening was indeed found still tied.

The string was cut and the dead woman was understood to have been released from whatever constraint had brought her back.

No secure name has been attached to the woman and no parish exhumation record has been found proving that the grave was actually reopened for this reason. The exhumation therefore belongs to the explanatory folklore surrounding the custom.

What is recorded more securely is the custom itself: every fastening on the shroud was to be cut.

A knot left tied could become unfinished business.

Some Dead Were Not Taken Out Through the Door

Nineteenth Century | Highlands and Islands

The route taken from house to grave could also change according to the manner of death.

Campbell recorded that the bodies of people who died by suicide were not always carried out through the ordinary doorway. Instead, an opening could be made between the wall and the thatch and the corpse taken out through it.

He added another stark detail: such bodies, along with those of unbaptised children, could be buried outside the common churchyard.

The practice was not universal across Scotland and should not be represented as though every Highland family observed it. Burial customs varied between parishes, denominations and generations, and the legal and ecclesiastical treatment of suicide changed over time.

What the source preserves is the physical logic of the custom. A death considered abnormal could be given a different exit from the house and a different place in the ground.

The body did not leave by the door used in life.

The Nicholsons Sent to Dunvegan for a Wax Shirt When Someone Died

Nineteenth-Century Recorded Tradition | Scorrybreck and Dunvegan, Isle of Skye

When somebody died in the Nicholson family of Scorrybreck on Skye, an unusual object had to be obtained from Dunvegan.

John Gregorson Campbell called it a Leine Chéir — a “wax shirt”. Despite the name, this was not ordinary clothing. It was cere-cloth, fabric impregnated with wax and used for wrapping a corpse before burial.

Campbell considered the custom remarkable because he knew of no other Highland example of cere-cloth being used in this way. He added that the Nicholsons of Scorrybreck were said to trace their family through Neacal Mòr of Mungastadt and that friendship between the Nicholsons and the chief of the MacLeods explained the connection with Dunvegan.

On every occasion of a death in the family, Campbell wrote, the wax shirt was sent for from Dunvegan.

The record does not tell us whether the same garment was repeatedly returned and reused, whether a fresh cere-cloth was prepared for each funeral, exactly where at Dunvegan it was stored or which Nicholson first introduced the practice. Those details are lost.

What survives is precise enough to be unusual. When death entered one Skye family, somebody had to make contact with Dunvegan and obtain the waxed wrapping in which the dead would be prepared.

Sir James Standsfield’s Corpse Was Said to Bleed for His Son

7–15 February 1688 | New Mills near Haddington, Edinburgh and Haddington

Sir James Standsfield of New Mills was dead, and his son Philip stood accused of murdering him.

The prosecution was not reconstructed centuries later from folklore. An authorised account of the trial was printed in 1688 “by authority”, preserving the case against Philip Standsfield and the extraordinary punishment imposed on him.

The trial took place on 7 February 1688.

Among the evidence was an episode rooted in an old European belief generally called cruentation or the ordeal of the bier. The belief held that the corpse of a murdered person might respond in the presence of the murderer, most famously by bleeding afresh.

When Sir James’s body was being placed in its coffin, Philip was present. Witnesses said blood issued from his father’s neck when Philip touched or handled him.

To those who believed in the bier-right, the dead man had identified his killer.

The prosecution contained considerably more than this incident, and it would be misleading to suggest that Philip was condemned solely because the corpse supposedly bled. But the episode was admitted into the evidential history of an actual Scottish murder trial.

The jury found Philip guilty.

The sentence was minute in its brutality. On 15 February, between two and four in the afternoon, he was to be taken to the Mercat Cross of Edinburgh and hanged on a gibbet until dead. His tongue was to be cut out and burned on a scaffold. His right hand was to be cut off and fixed to the East Gate of Haddington. His body was then to be hung in chains.

The printed title of the authorised trial account says the “doom and sentence” was duly carried out.

Later retellings place his chained corpse at the Gallow Lee between Edinburgh and Leith, although the wording of the authorised title simply records that his body was hung in chains. His property was also forfeited and his name formally disgraced in the sentence as later reproduced.

The corpse that supposedly accused Philip disappears from the record.

Philip’s punishment does not.

Christian Wilson Touched Her Brother Alexander — and the Record Says His Body Bled

1661 | Dalkeith and Niddrie, Midlothian

Christian Wilson, also known as “the Lanthorne”, had already attracted suspicion before her brother Alexander died.

The surviving dittay was based on examinations taken before Sir William Murray of Newtoun and other commissioners at Dalkeith on 14 June 1661. Named witnesses included James Wilson, Abraham Macmillan, William Crichton, Fyfe and George Erskine.

The record says there was enmity between Christian and her brother and that she had threatened him. On the day Alexander died, he was seen at about three in the afternoon apparently healthy and going about his business. At about five that evening he was found dead in his own house.

The description of the body is unusually specific. Alexander was naked, his face torn and injured, and a large piece of flesh had been removed from his cheek. Yet the witnesses said there was no blood on or around him.

Neighbours came to see the corpse. Christian, although she lived next door, did not.

That absence itself became suspicious.

The minister and bailies ordered her brought into the house. The surviving wording says she came trembling, refused to approach the corpse and protested that she had never touched a dead body in her life.

The officials and Alexander’s friends pressed her to touch him gently.

Before she did so, sunlight was shining into the room. Christian prayed that just as God had sent the sun to give light in the house, he would also give light to discover the murderer.

She then placed her fingers softly on the wound.

The record says blood rushed from it while her fingers were upon it.

The witnesses considered this astonishing because others had touched the corpse without producing the same

effect. To them, Christian's own prayer had been answered against her.

That was not the only allegation used to build the image of Christian Wilson as a witch. Another story concerned William Richardson of Dalkeith, who had struck one of her hens with a stone. Christian was accused of threatening that he would never throw another. Richardson then became violently ill, was said to have fallen into madness and died within days while crying out that Christian tormented him in the form of a grey cat.

Richardson's nephew James later called Christian "the Lanthorne", said in the source to be a supernatural name attached to her, and she was accused of threatening that he would die as his uncle had if he did not stop.

There was another incident while Christian was being transported to Niddrie to confront another accused woman. Janet Cock, herself a confessing witch, had supposedly joked to one of the guards, John Stevin, that the devil might raise a whirlwind and carry Christian away on the road.

The following day a sudden gust struck the party. Christian was blown from the pillion into water and had to be recovered by her guards. The weather itself was then folded into the accusations against her.

None of these allegations proves supernatural activity. They show how ordinary events, illness, coincidence, hostile reputation and the corpse test were assembled into a case.

Christian's persecution had begun before 1661. Historian Brian Levack found that she had previously been held and then released on bond during the period of English occupation. After the Restoration, the machinery of Scottish witch prosecution restarted at extraordinary speed.

In 1661 Christian Wilson was finally burned for witchcraft.

The available sources do not give a sufficiently secure exact execution time or place for her to add one without qualification. What they do establish is that the woman whose brother's corpse was said to bleed beneath her fingers did not survive the hunt that followed.

The living gave the blood its meaning.

Christian died because of the world in which that meaning was accepted.

Marion Pardoun Was Strangled at the Stake and Burned to Ashes

15–22 March 1644 | Hillswick, Northmavine, Scalloway and the Hill of Berrie, Shetland

Marion Pardoun, also recorded as Marion Peebles or Pardone, lived at Hillswick in Northmavine.

Her age is not entirely consistent across the scholarship. An earlier transcription described her as 39. The 2026 edition of her trial records by Julian Goodare and Liv Helene Willumsen describes her as over sixty. What is clear is that she was married to Svend Iverson, had adult children, employed a servant and was not among the poorest members of the community.

She was denounced by Janet Fraser, who had herself recently been executed for witchcraft.

The first formal steps were taken through the Presbytery of Shetland. A draft dittay containing fifteen points was presented on 15 March 1644. The material then passed into the hands of the secular authorities at Scalloway.

Marion's neighbours accused her of an extraordinary range of harm. Sick people, diseased animals, spoiled

brewing and damaged milk production were attributed to her. Some accusations concerned quarrels followed by sickness and then reconciliation. The record also claimed that ravens accompanied her, that she consorted with the devil and that she could assume the form of a porpoise.

The most spectacular accusation concerned four fishermen. Marion and another accused woman were alleged to have caused the boat to overturn in fair weather off Hillswick while Marion was transformed into a porpoise.

The dead bodies became part of the prosecution.

Marion and her husband Svend were brought to see the corpses days after the deaths and made to lay hands on them. The account says that blood, which was assumed to have vanished from the bodies in the ordinary course of death, appeared again from one corpse at the collarbone, hands and fingers.

Her interrogators treated that as divine revelation of murder.

On 21 March procurator fiscal James Gray asked that Marion Pardoun and Margareth Guthrumsdochter be put before an assize. The assize considered Marion's dittay and found all but two points proved.

The sentence fell at Scalloway on 22 March 1644.

The older printed trial record states that Marion Peebles, alias Pardone, was to be strangled at a stake and burned to ashes at the Hill of Berrie for witchcraft and murder.

That sentence was carried out. Later Shetland historical work identifies the Hill of Berrie, or Gallow Hill above Scalloway, as the execution place. A modern memorial now stands in Scalloway to those killed in the islands' seventeenth-century witchcraft prosecutions.

The allegation that Marion became a porpoise belongs to the prosecution.

Her death at the Hill of Berrie does not.

Sergeant Arthur Davies's Ghost Entered a Murder Trial — and the Accused Men Were Acquitted

27 September 1749–12 June 1754 | Dubrach, Glenconie, Braemar and Edinburgh

Sergeant Arthur Davies served in General John Guise's Regiment of Foot and in 1749 was stationed with soldiers at Dubrach or Glendee in Braemar.

Donald Farquharson knew him. At the later murder trial, Farquharson described Davies as sober, civil to local people and careful with his money. He said the sergeant carried gold in a long blue or green purse, silver in another, wore a silver watch, silver buckles at his shoes and knees, possessed two rings said to be gold, and sometimes wore a roe-skin vest or another with a white stripe beneath a blue upper coat. When hunting or shooting, Davies wore Highland brogues fitted for buckles and a laced hat with a silver button.

Farquharson last saw him on Wednesday 27 September 1749 before leaving for the fair at Kirkmichael.

When he returned, Davies was missing.

Soldiers searched the hills for several days without finding him.

Months later, another man, Alexander Macpherson, also known as MacGillas, found human remains in a peat

moss between Glenchristie and Glenconie, two or three miles from Dubrach. He saw scattered bones, dark mouse-coloured hair, pieces of blue cloth and brogues from which the buckle straps appeared to have been cut.

What Macpherson said happened next brought the supernatural into a future murder trial.

He testified that while he was in bed, a figure appeared to him dressed in blue. At first he thought it was a living man, but the apparition identified itself as Sergeant Davies and told him that the sergeant had been murdered at the Hill of Christie.

The apparition instructed Macpherson to find the bones and ask Donald Farquharson to help bury them.

Macpherson did find the remains.

He initially delayed deciding what to do. According to his testimony, the apparition appeared again, this time naked, and reminded him to bury the body.

Macpherson eventually took Farquharson to the site. They gathered the bones, dug a hole in the moss with the shaft of a shovel, placed blue cloth beneath and above the remains, covered them with turf and buried Davies there rather than taking him to a churchyard.

Macpherson was asked whether he had questioned the apparition about the murderer. He said that on the first appearance he asked who had killed Davies, only to be told that if he had not asked the question the ghost might have been able to tell him. On the second appearance, Macpherson claimed, the apparition named Duncan Clerk and Alexander Macdonald.

He said the conversations with the ghost took place in Gaelic.

The case finally came before the High Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh's New Session House on 10 June 1754. Duncan Terig, alias Clerk, and Alexander Bain Macdonald were prisoners in the Tolbooth of Edinburgh.

The court was presided over by Charles Erskine of Alva, Justice Clerk, with Alexander Fraser of Strichen, Patrick Grant of Elchies, Hugh Dalrymple of Drummorie and James Ferguson of Killkerran sitting as commissioners of justiciary. The prosecution was brought by William Grant of Prestongrange, the Lord Advocate.

The apparition evidence did not stand alone. The prosecution also examined rings, a damaged gun, clothing, the accused men's reputations and movements, and alleged possession of objects belonging to Davies.

The jury considered the indictment and the witnesses for both prosecution and defence.

On 12 June, it returned a unanimous verdict.

Duncan Terig and Alexander Bain Macdonald were not guilty.

They were dismissed from the bar.

A supposed ghost had named two murderers in a Scottish courtroom.

The jury let both men go.

Murdoch Grant, Kenneth the Dreamer and the Assynt Murder

March 1830–2 November 1831 | Drumbeg, Loch Torr na h-Eigin, Dornoch, Inverness and Edinburgh

Murdoch Grant was an itinerant pedlar from Rathbeg in Lochbroom who travelled through Assynt carrying goods for sale.

In March 1830 he disappeared.

Four weeks later his body was discovered in Loch Torr na h-Eigin, inland from Drumbeg. He had been known to carry a substantial quantity of goods and money, estimated in later archival material at about £40. None of it was found with the body.

At first there was uncertainty over whether he had died accidentally.

Hugh Macleod, a young local schoolmaster and son of Roderick Macleod, tenant farmer at Lynnmeanach, was among those regarded as educated and respectable enough to be consulted. Suspicion nevertheless began to move towards him.

Macleod was 21.

The Crown precognition later located the alleged murder and robbery on the footpath leading from Drumbaig towards Lochindarroch in Assynt.

Local attention sharpened when Macleod appeared to be spending money despite having left his teaching employment. A £5 note was a conspicuous possession for a young unemployed man in the district.

Then Kenneth Fraser entered the case.

He became known as Kenneth the Dreamer.

Fraser said he had seen Grant's missing goods in a dream or vision beneath stones near Macleod's home. According to the archival account, the description corresponded with a recognisable cairn and belongings connected with the murdered pedlar were found.

Later retellings debated whether Fraser had obtained his information in some less supernatural way, including through knowledge acquired while drinking with Macleod. The historical record cannot establish the origin of the dream. It can establish that Fraser presented his information in that form and that the discovery became part of the case.

Macleod was arrested and sent to Dornoch. The Dornoch Jail Book records him there on 10 May 1830. His house was searched and possessions associated with Grant were recovered.

The prosecution dragged on into the following year.

On 27 September 1831, an assize found Hugh Macleod guilty of murder and robbery at Inverness.

The sentence survives word for word in his death warrant.

Lords Moncreiff and Medwyn ordered Macleod returned to the Tolbooth of Inverness, where he was to be kept on bread and water until Monday 24 October. Between two and four that afternoon he was to be taken from the Tolbooth to the common place of execution of the burgh, or whatever place Inverness magistrates appointed, and hanged by the neck on a gibbet by the common executioner until dead.

The execution took place at the Longman, Inverness.

Later accounts describe a crowd numbering thousands.

The punishment did not end with death.

The warrant ordered Macleod's body delivered to the Professor of Anatomy at the University of Edinburgh to be publicly dissected and anatomised.

On 2 November 1831, somebody at Edinburgh College wrote directly on the warrant acknowledging receipt of Hugh Macleod's body on behalf of Dr Monro.

Later accounts say Macleod eventually confessed to a clergyman that he had killed Murdoch Grant with a hammer. The confession belongs to the subsequent history of the case rather than the surviving death warrant itself.

The murder began with a pedlar's body hidden in a Highland loch.

It ended with the convicted killer's body delivered to an Edinburgh anatomy room.

John Brugh Dug Up Corpses, Healed Cattle and Was Strangled and Burned

1643 | Fossoway, Glendevon, Muckhart and Edinburgh Castle Hill

John Brugh, or Johnne Brughe, came from the parish of Fossoway and Tullibole in Kinross-shire.

He was about 56 years old, married and had worked as a healer for decades. The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft describes him as a professional practitioner who received substantial payments in money and kind for treating people and animals.

Many of the accusations against him concern healing rather than harm.

He used spoken formulas, charms, objects and remedies for people, ale and livestock. The prosecution reinterpreted these activities as evidence of a demonic pact.

Other charges were darker.

Brugh was accused of digging up corpses at Muckhart and using human remains in magical practices. One account names Johnne Chrystiesone, a servant, among the dead associated with the accusations.

Another episode involved cattle dying from disease. Brugh and a woman called Neane Nikclerith were said to have used enchanted stones in water to protect the herd. One animal too sick to walk was dragged from the byre and buried alive in a hole. The surviving cattle were then driven over the place.

The prosecution treated this as diabolical charming.

Brugh was found guilty.

Old witchcraft literature gives his execution date as 24 November 1643 and describes him as "worried and burnt". In Scots legal and historical usage, "worried" in this context means strangled.

Historic Environment Scotland includes Johnne Brughe among known people executed for witchcraft at Castle Hill in Edinburgh in 1643.

His career as a healer had lasted perhaps thirty years.

His death took minutes.

Jon Neill and the Dead Man's Hand

26 March–2 April 1631 | Berwickshire and Edinburgh Castle Hill

Jon Neill was about 36 years old and came from Berwickshire.

His prosecution contained one of the most macabre objects in the Scottish witchcraft record: the hand of a dead man.

Neill was accused of taking part in a magical conspiracy against Sir George Home of Manderston. The alleged ritual materials included an enchanted dead bird and a human hand removed from a corpse.

He was imprisoned in Edinburgh and brought to trial on 26 March 1631.

The central prosecution involved Sir Thomas Hope of Craighall, the Lord Advocate, and Alexander Colville, Justice Depute. The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft records a guilty verdict and no defence.

The sentence was death.

Neill was taken to Castle Hill, one of Edinburgh's established execution places for people convicted of witchcraft.

The execution method is recorded as strangling and burning.

The execution was announced on 2 April 1631.

The dead person whose hand supposedly entered the magical plot has never been identified.

Jon Neill has.

His record ends at Castle Hill.

Issobell Watsonne Used Rowan, Wheat and Part of a Human Body in a Cure

1590 | Perthshire

Issobell Watsonne's surviving record is much richer than the simple phrase "a dead person's finger" suggests.

National Records of Scotland identifies material from her prosecution in 1590. One confession describes a cure involving nine grains of wheat, a piece of rowan and what the record calls a bone or joint with sinews still attached to it.

The treatment was given in response to a request made by the wife of James Kynaird, who sought help for her husband.

Watsonne initially said that the material had come from Sir Johne Row, minister of Perth. Her statement was challenged because the wheat appeared fresh, the rowan was green and the piece of bone still had fibres or tendons resembling lint strings attached to it.

She then gave another explanation.

She said she had obtained the objects from a female relative — the wording is difficult and has been interpreted as an aunt or mother-in-law — to protect herself against blows from the fairy folk, who she

claimed struck her painfully at changes of the moon.

The same record says she connected promises or powers with the daughter of the Queen of the Fairies.

Later summaries described the body material as part of a dead person's finger.

The rowan itself had a long Scottish history as a protective plant. What turned the episode into criminal evidence was the combination of healing practice, human remains and supernatural explanation.

Watsonne's final legal fate is less clear.

No secure sentence or execution record has been located in the surviving material used here.

That absence cannot be repaired by assumption.

Issobell Watsonne appears in the archive with wheat, green rowan, human bone and a story about the fairy folk.

Then the record loses her.

Andro Man, the Queen of Elphen and the White Horses

1597–20 January 1598 | Aberdeen

Andro Man was an old man by the time Aberdeen authorities prosecuted him.

The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft gives his age as about seventy and associates him with Tarbruith in Aberdeenshire. He had a reputation as a folk healer and was accused of both beneficial and harmful magic.

His confession was taken on 21 October 1597. A royal commission followed in December, and he was tried in Aberdeen Tolbooth on 20 January 1598.

The officials involved included Provost Alexander Chalmer, Bailie Thomas Leslie and Peter Blackburn, Bishop of Aberdeen.

The supernatural world described in Man's testimony is extraordinary.

He spoke of a figure he called Christsonday and of the Queen of Elphen. He said that when he was a boy, a supernatural being had appeared in the likeness of a woman whom he called the Queen of Elphen. Later testimony attributed to him described a sexual relationship with her lasting decades and children supposedly born from it.

He described Christsonday in several forms, including a stag, an angel in white and a supernatural knight.

One of the most vivid passages concerned Holy Rood Day. Man said he saw Christsonday come out of the snow in the shape of a stag while the Queen of Elphen and her company rode white horses.

He was also accused of healing.

One charge said that Elspet Boyne of Aird had suffered violent madness and that Man cured her by prayers, charms or enchantments. Another accused him of claiming that he could take milk from a cow whenever he pleased.

The authorities interpreted his fairy language through a Christian demonological framework. What Man called

the Queen of Elphen could be recast as a devilish spirit; healing could become sorcery.

The assize found him guilty.

The Survey does not preserve a sentence, execution date, execution place or method. Other modern research projects list his outcome as execution, and later writers have commonly described him as burned.

The primary trial database itself is more cautious.

A final execution record sufficient to establish the precise manner and date has not been identified here.

The safest conclusion is therefore the one the surviving judicial record supports absolutely: Andro Man was convicted of witchcraft at Aberdeen in January 1598.

What happened immediately after that remains less securely documented than the trial that condemned him.

Dr Arthur Mitchell Went Looking for the Old Cures — and Found Them

1862 | North-West Highlands and Islands

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Scotland had railways, universities, formal medical institutions and a national system for supervising people then described as lunatics.

Dr Arthur Mitchell belonged to that modern administrative world.

He was Deputy Commissioner in Lunacy for Scotland and travelled through Highland and island communities observing the treatment of people suffering mental illness, epilepsy and conditions that earlier generations often explained through possession, supernatural attack or inherited folk belief.

In 1862 he presented a paper to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland titled *On Various Superstitions in the North-West Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Especially in Relation to Lunacy*.

What makes Mitchell's evidence unusually valuable is proximity.

He repeatedly insisted that he was not discussing the Middle Ages. He had met patients, spoken to witnesses and questioned people who had participated in rituals themselves.

Several of the practices were within living memory.

Some, he believed, were still being performed.

A Black Cock Was Buried Alive Where the Seizure Began

Recorded 1862 | North-West Highlands and Islands

One cure concerned epilepsy.

On the place where the person first suffered a seizure, a black cock was buried alive. A lock of the patient's hair and parings from the fingernails could be buried with it.

Mitchell said he had personally seen at least three people with epilepsy for whom the procedure was said to have been performed.

He also spoke with a woman who had participated in one of the sacrifices and described the procedure to him

in detail.

Later research into Mitchell's notebooks found additional variations. In some examples, coins and red onions accompanied the cock and hair.

One school story was particularly striking. A boy had suffered a fit at school. Two men came carrying a live black cock and some of the boy's hair. They opened a hole in the school floor at the place where the seizure had occurred, put the living bird and the hair into it, and closed the floor again.

The person who later told the story said he never saw the boy suffer another fit.

That claimed recovery cannot establish that the burial cured epilepsy.

Another case had the opposite outcome.

A doctor in an unnamed northern town was called to a poor man from the fishing population who had suffered epileptic seizures and had suddenly died. His friends told the doctor they at least had the comfort of knowing that everything possible had been tried.

When the doctor asked what they had done, they pointed to the place beneath the bed where a cock had been buried alive.

The ritual had not saved him.

Mitchell considered the persistence of the practice extraordinary because it occurred not in an isolated medieval world but in a town reached by railway, with several churches and schools.

Modern medicine had arrived.

The black cock had not yet gone.

A Human Skull Was Scraped Into Water as Medicine

Recorded 1862 | Ross-shire and the North-West Highlands

Mitchell found other epilepsy treatments in which the dead themselves became ingredients.

One family obtained part of the skull of a person who had died by suicide from a considerable distance away.

Material from the skull was scraped into water.

The liquid was then given to a young person suffering from epilepsy without telling the patient what had been mixed into it.

The journey involved in obtaining the remains is significant. This was not an object casually found in a nearby graveyard. Somebody went to considerable trouble because the family believed that the skull of a person who had died an unusual death possessed therapeutic value.

Mitchell did not preserve enough identifying information to reconstruct the patient's later life securely.

The surviving account does not tell us whether the seizures stopped.

The family's effort survives.

The outcome does not.

The Duncansby Head Skull Became a Drinking Vessel

Before 1862 | Duncansby Head, Caithness

Another skull case can be located more precisely.

Mitchell identified the dead woman only by the initials C. B.

She had died after going over Duncansby Head in Caithness.

Her body was buried.

Then, according to the information Mitchell investigated, the grave was disturbed so that the skull could be obtained.

The skull became a drinking vessel used as a remedy for epilepsy.

The patient was identified only by the initials J. B.

By the time Mitchell's informant described the case, J. B. was dead.

The skull had survived as medicine.

The patient had not.

A Man Was Put in Bed With the Body of His Dead Mother

Before 1862 | Barvas, Isle of Lewis

At Barvas on Lewis, Mitchell recorded one of the most disturbing treatments in his entire inquiry.

A man suffering from severe mental illness and epilepsy was placed in bed with the corpse of his dead mother.

The practice was not presented to Mitchell as ancient legend.

He said he met numerous people who had known the man.

The treatment had a definite outcome.

It did not cure him.

The man later died during a fit.

Those around him had used the body of his own mother because they hoped contact with the dead might accomplish something ordinary medicine could not.

It failed.

Water Used to Wash a Dead Sister Was Given as Medicine

Before 1862 | Kintail

Another of Mitchell's cases came from Kintail.

A person suffering seizures was reportedly given water in which the body of his dead sister had been washed.

Unlike many of Mitchell's anonymous reports, this patient was someone Mitchell personally saw.

He also recorded what people around the man said happened afterwards.

The seizures became less violent and less frequent.

That does not establish causation. Epilepsy can fluctuate naturally; recollection can be mistaken; the improvement may have had nothing to do with the treatment.

Mitchell did not present it as a scientific cure.

But the reported outcome belongs to the historical account.

A man was given water used on the corpse of his sister.

Those around him believed his condition improved.

Mitchell later met him alive.

A Woman Was Buried at Low Water — and the Sea Returned Her

About 1822; Recorded 1862 | Ross-shire

Mitchell recorded another incident from around 1822 concerning a woman who had died by suicide.

The precise place name was partly obscured in the printed account.

Her body was buried at low water.

The sea exposed the grave.

The corpse was washed or uncovered back into the world of the living and ended up lying beside a road during snowy weather.

Mitchell's informant said the woman's body remained there for two days.

Eventually a local person of influence intervened.

The corpse was buried again.

Remarkably, the second burial followed broadly the same low-water principle, although greater care was taken to make the grave secure.

The informant said he had witnessed the episode.

The woman's name was not printed.

Her burial failed once.

The sea gave her back.

Then the community put her into the ground again.

The Dead Were Blamed When the Herring Disappeared

Nineteenth Century | Loch Duich, Skye, Applecross and the West Highlands

The dead could also be blamed for what happened in the sea.

John Gregorson Campbell recorded a belief in the north, including Skye and Applecross, that no herring would be caught in water visible from the grave of a person who had died by suicide.

For fishing communities, this had consequences far beyond folklore.

A failed herring season could mean economic disaster.

Arthur Mitchell recorded an account from the Loch Duich area in which a body was blamed after the fish disappeared.

The corpse was exhumed.

It was carried away from the coast and taken to the top of the mountain dividing Inverness-shire from Ross-shire, far enough from the sea that its grave could no longer command a view of the water.

Then the story supplied its resolution.

The herring returned.

Mitchell did not prove that moving a corpse altered fish migration. He recorded that people said it did.

Within the belief, the cure had worked.

The People of Coigach Put a Body Back Into the Sea — and It Came Ashore Again

Nineteenth Century | Coigach and Aird Dhubh, Wester Ross

At Coigach, a body washed ashore.

Local people were said to have taken it back to the water and set it adrift.

The sea returned it.

The corpse came ashore again near the place where the man was believed to have died.

This time people did not return him to the water.

They carried the body inland and uphill to Aird Dhubh.

There it was buried where the grave could no longer be seen from the sea.

Mitchell preserved one final physical detail.

The ropes used to carry the corpse were said to have become visible again later.

His informant remembered the event well.

The dead man's name disappeared.

The ropes remained in memory.

A Purifying Fire Was Lit Where the Body Came Ashore

Nineteenth Century | Loch Carron, Strome Ferry and Lochalsh

Another man was said to have died by suicide in Loch Carron.

His body came ashore near Strome Ferry.

Some years later the herring fishery was poor.

People gathered at the place where the corpse had been found and lit a large fire.

A similar act was remembered elsewhere in Lochalsh.

Later interpreters described the fire as purification or propitiation, connected with the belief that the dead person had damaged the fishery.

Mitchell does not tell us that the herring returned afterwards.

He does not identify every person who stood around the fire or preserve a speech explaining what they believed.

There is no responsible way to manufacture a resolution.

The record ends with the fire burning beside the shore.

The Little Loch Broom Coffin Was Dragged Into the Hills

Nineteenth Century | Little Loch Broom, Dundonnell and the Hills Beyond the Coast

Another body washed ashore on Little Loch Broom.

A rough deal box was hurriedly made to serve as a coffin.

The tools used to make the box were then reportedly sunk in the sea.

The coffin was not buried on the shore.

It was towed by ropes across the loch and then dragged up the hillsides to a remote place behind the mountain range west of Dundonnell.

The destination was deliberately chosen.

It lay beyond sight of the sea and beyond cultivated land.

The box, ropes and body were all taken into that lonely ground and buried.

A related nineteenth-century report describes another case in the Ullapool district in which a crowd resisted the official handling of a body because they believed burial on the wrong side of the river would bring famine or failure to sea and land. The horse was unhitched from the cart and the remains were wheeled for miles over the hills until they were buried about three miles from Ullapool on the road towards Rhidorroch Forest.

Police followed at a distance.

The fiscal at Dingwall was informed.

The reason given for these actions was not fear that the dead would walk.

It was fear that the dead, buried in the wrong place, could empty the sea.

Irvine Opened Its Graves — and About a Dozen Were Empty

1826 | Irvine Old Parish Churchyard, Ayrshire

By the 1820s Scottish families had another reason to fear what happened after burial.

Bodies really were disappearing.

Irvine Town Council recorded the crisis directly in 1826, describing “very distressing depredations” in Irvine Old Parish Churchyard caused by the disinterring and carrying away of the dead.

Suspicion fell on an organised group.

One suspected man was John Fletcher, born in Irvine in September 1798 to William Fletcher and Grizel Cowan. Fletcher was a surgeon, councillor, baillie and founding member of Irvine Burns Club.

Another was Robert Stein, a Glasgow carrier.

William Anderson, a butcher in Seagate, was also suspected.

So was James Wilson, the sexton and Town Officer responsible for the churchyard.

Wilson had recently built a house in West Road. In later local tradition it became known as the Resurrectionist House.

The council dismissed him.

Irvine had already formed a society to watch over new burials. The Town Council donated £10 to the organisation for several years and offered a £20 reward if resurrectionists were caught and apprehended.

Then officials tried a simple method of testing whether graves had been disturbed.

Coins were hidden beneath the turf of recent burials.

When the ground was inspected, many coins had disappeared.

The decision was made to open graves.

A large crowd gathered.

About a dozen were empty.

The search extended to Glasgow University, where one stolen corpse was identified and returned to Irvine for burial.

The town’s defences became increasingly physical. Bodies were wired to their coffins around the neck, feet and waist, with the wire secured to the outside of the coffin. A movable watch-house was installed.

Three men spent each night guarding the burial ground.

They carried oil lamps.

They also carried blunderbusses.

There was one final irony.

Nothing was proved against John Fletcher, but suspicion destroyed his standing in Irvine. He left the town for Ayr.

He died in November 1830 aged 32.

His body was brought home.

John Fletcher was buried in Irvine Old Parish Churchyard — the same ground whose missing bodies had helped ruin his life.

A Farmer's Dog Frightened the Airth Body Snatchers Away

June 1820 | Airth Churchyard, Stirlingshire

An old man was buried in Airth churchyard on 13 June 1820.

Within days, resurrectionists came for him.

They opened the grave, broke into the coffin and began pulling the corpse out.

The theft was interrupted not by a watchman or constable but by a farmer passing nearby.

One of his horses was sick and he was travelling to obtain medicine.

His dog was with him.

As they passed the churchyard, the dog ran into the burial ground and began barking furiously. The farmer called it back.

The dog refused to come.

The men working at the grave fled.

The attempted theft was not discovered immediately. A day or two later schoolchildren noticed that earth had been removed from the grave and the turf carefully laid aside.

Local people opened it.

They found the coffin lid broken and the dead man partly pulled out.

The contemporary report does not name him.

Nor does it describe exactly how the body was subsequently restored to the coffin and grave.

It is reasonable to suppose that it was reburied, but that is an inference rather than something stated in the surviving report.

What is recorded is enough.

The resurrectionists reached the corpse.

A dog stopped them.

The Kingskettle Dead Were Fastened to Their Coffins With Iron

About 1820 | Kingskettle, Fife

At Kingskettle in Fife, fear of body snatchers survives as an object.

An iron collar dating from around 1820 was found bolted through the bottom of a coffin and fixed around the neck of the corpse.

Its purpose was brutally practical.

A resurrectionist might dig down, smash open a coffin and pull the body upwards.

The collar fixed the dead person to the coffin itself.

It was one of several methods developed in Scotland to protect recent burials during the weeks when a corpse remained useful to anatomists. Mortsafes, locked enclosures and night watches served the same purpose.

The person whose neck was held by the Kingskettle collar has not been securely identified in the museum account.

The individual biography disappeared.

The iron remained.

The Banchory-Ternan Watch-House Had a Hole for a Gun

1829–Present | Banchory-Ternan Parish Church Graveyard, Aberdeenshire

At Banchory-Ternan, the defence of the dead became architecture.

A circular two-storey watch-house was built in the graveyard of Banchory-Ternan Parish Church.

The date 1829 is carved into the stone above the bell.

The building is constructed of rubble, roofed in slate and topped by a conical roof incorporating a bell tower.

Below one of its small windows is a round opening.

The Aberdeenshire Historic Environment Record preserves the tradition that a gun was fired through it to frighten would-be body snatchers.

The watch-house survives.

It is protected as a Category B listed building.

It was restored and re-harled in 1998.

Nearly two centuries after the resurrectionists disappeared, the structure built to watch for them remains standing among the graves.

Peter McGall Was Found Sitting Between Two Men in a Cart

1826 | Edrom, Hardens Hill, Duns, Murray Street and Duns Market Square, Berwickshire

Peter McGall had been buried in Edrom churchyard for only a day or two when two travellers encountered a cart near Hardens Hill.

The men who found it were Mr Howden, a farmer from Whitelaw, and Mark Cossar, an innkeeper from Duns. They were returning from Gifford Fair.

The cart appeared to carry three passengers.

The man in the middle looked remarkably pale.

Howden and Cossar challenged the travellers.

The two living occupants ran away.

The third remained exactly where he was.

He was Peter McGall.

The recently buried man had been taken from his grave.

Howden and Cossar brought both body and trap back to Duns. McGall was prepared for burial again. Local history preserves the name of Mary Manuel of Allanton, who was said to have prepared McGall's corpse on both occasions.

The magistrates impounded the horse and cart.

A horse dealer from Kelso came forward and reclaimed the horse, apparently having hired it out in the ordinary course of business.

Nobody claimed the trap.

The following spring, rumours circulated that someone intended to recover it.

Public anger rose.

The cart was being stored in Murray Street in Duns.

A crowd gathered.

The sheriff read the Riot Act.

The crowd broke into the store anyway, dragged the cart into Duns Market Square and burned it.

Local tradition continued to attach McGall to the landscape. The coffin from his first burial was said to have been discovered beneath a culvert on the Edrom road, which became known as McGall's Bridge. Later local tradition claimed iron hooks once remained under the bridge where coffins could be kept dry until removed.

No surviving gravestone has been identified for Peter McGall and the Old Parish Registers have not yielded a clear record of either burial.

He was buried twice.

The cart that carried him out of the grave was burned by a mob.

Perth's Corpse Watches Became Midnight Terror Campaigns

5 May 1631 | Perth

A lykewake was supposed to keep company with the dead.

In Perth, some people discovered another use for the long hours after midnight.

The kirk session complained in 1631 that people attending corpse watches were leaving the houses in which bodies lay and going through the town to disturb respectable neighbours.

They hammered on doors.

When the household woke, the pranksters announced that one of their close friends had suddenly become dangerously ill.

The alarmed residents got out of bed and hurried away to see the supposedly dying person.

Nobody was dying.

The message was false.

The kirk session regarded this not as harmless entertainment but as profane disorder associated with an occasion that should have been sober.

On 5 May 1631 it ordered that members of Perth Town Council meet with the session and frame an ordinance requiring sobriety and godly conduct at lykewakes. Those who caused profane disturbance were to be excluded.

The surviving record does not tell us whether the regulation stopped the midnight trick.

What it records is a seventeenth-century Scottish town trying to control people who had discovered that the fastest way to terrify a sleeping household was to arrive from a corpse watch and announce another death.

John Campbell's Father Took His Hanged Son to a Doctor

5 April–14 May 1824 | Stirling Tolbooth, Canongate, Stirling and St Ninians

John Campbell was nineteen years old.

He had been born in 1804 at Bridge of Kelty near Callander and moved with his family to St Ninians while still young.

By 1824 he had accumulated a substantial record of theft and housebreaking.

His own confession listed stolen money, watches, whisky, hides, cheese, butter, pistols, socks and spectacles, taken during offences in Crieff, Stirling, St Ninians and elsewhere.

Campbell was being held in Stirling Tolbooth with David Ross, John Boax and James Smith pending trial.

The four men planned an escape.

David Ross's wife smuggled tools into the jail: a screw auger, two keys, a small hand pitcher and two small

chisels.

The prisoners bored through a cell door.

They opened further doors using keys found inside the building, passed through the courtroom and finally escaped through a window using blankets.

On 5 April 1824 Stirling Town Council authorised officials to investigate the escape and a reward was offered for the fugitives.

Campbell headed towards Edinburgh.

Sergeant Major McKenna of Edinburgh Police found him in a house in the Canongate and arrested him.

He was returned to face trial.

On 9 April 1824 Campbell was sentenced to death.

The court regarded the rapid escalation of his crimes as sufficiently serious to justify the sentence despite his age.

Five weeks later, on 14 May, he was hanged at Stirling.

His body remained suspended for about thirty-five minutes.

His father and brother were waiting nearby with a horse and cart.

When the body was released, they did not immediately take John Campbell home to bury him.

They drove him to a medical man in St Ninians.

They wanted him revived.

The practitioner warned Campbell's father that there was no hope.

The family insisted that an attempt be made.

The body was rubbed.

The usual methods then used in attempts to restore circulation were applied.

Veins at the temples were opened.

Nothing worked.

John Campbell remained dead.

The Stirling Journal preserved one final detail through the archival account. The medical practitioner reportedly believed that if Campbell had hung for ten minutes less, the outcome might have been different.

Whether that was medically plausible cannot now be tested.

The effort failed.

John Campbell had escaped Stirling Tolbooth once.

His father could not bring him back from the gallows.

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TEA WITH GUNNS | 24 September 2026

The Pothole Tea Club

Read online: <https://modern.scot/mrs-gunns-unofficial-pothole-tea-club/>



There are certain signs that summer is over in the Highlands. The swallows leave, the evenings draw in, Mr Gunn begins carrying logs into the house with the solemn expression of a man preparing for a siege, and nobody suggests sitting outside unless there is ample wine, a bonfire and a starry night.

The pothole is still there, of course. Nothing as dramatic as repair has taken place. It remains immediately outside our house, a broad, dark depression in the road which began in spring as a modest

imperfection and, after several months of rain, traffic and official awareness, developed into something with presence. I have reported it to the council three times. The council therefore knows about it almost as well as I do, although I have had the advantage of seeing it every day.

My first report was responsible and civic-minded. I provided the location, dimensions and photographs requested by the online form and resisted writing “outside my house” under every heading. The second report was more detailed because by then I had watched its development and could speak with some authority. By the third, I felt we were corresponding about a mutual acquaintance. I informed the council that it had become wider, deeper and considerably more successful at attracting attention, although the form did not provide a box for personality.

For several weeks I regarded it as an annoyance. Then, one afternoon, a white van came along the road at just the wrong angle and went into it with a tremendous thump. The driver slowed, looked in his mirror and continued on his way. I looked up from the garden and discovered, to my surprise, that I had enjoyed the whole thing enormously.

After that I began to notice patterns. Local people generally knew where the pothole was and approached it with the calm manoeuvre of people who had already paid for one suspension repair and did not intend to finance another. Visitors were less fortunate. Camper vans were particularly promising, delivery vehicles depended on the driver, and the people who owned enormous four-wheel drives frequently approached with such confidence that one felt the pothole took it personally. Hire cars were the most reliable performers because their drivers tended to be looking simultaneously at the scenery, the satnav and the side of the road on which they had suddenly remembered they were supposed to be driving.

I happened to mention this to Effie. I did not invite her over specifically to watch vehicles hit a hole in the road. I want that clearly understood. I merely said there had been some activity outside the house recently, and Effie, displaying the healthy concern of a neighbour, asked what sort of activity and at what time it generally occurred. She arrived the following afternoon at half past two, by coincidence bringing biscuits.

The weather was still warm then, so we took our tea outside. Our chairs happened to face the road, which was not deliberate either, although Effie did move hers slightly after discovering that a rose bush obstructed her view of traffic approaching from the bend. For twelve minutes nothing happened. Then a blue hatchback

appeared, travelling at a speed suggesting its driver had not yet encountered the local road network in any meaningful way. Effie stopped speaking. I stopped pouring. The car reached the pothole with a magnificent bang, emerged successfully from the other side and continued towards the village.

“Oh, that was a good one,” Effie said.

I reminded her that we were not actually watching.

After that the gatherings grew naturally, which is how most dangerous organisations begin. Jean heard about the pothole and came for tea the following Tuesday. Then Margaret arrived, and Margaret changed everything because Margaret is interested in photography. Until then we had maintained the entirely defensible position that four women sitting beside a road, drinking tea and becoming suddenly silent whenever a vehicle approached, could be explained as ordinary social behaviour. The appearance of a camera with a telephoto lens made this argument considerably harder to sustain.

Margaret assured me that she was interested only in movement. She had recently been learning how to photograph wildlife and wanted to practise using a setting on her camera designed for fast action. I pointed out that a Ford Focus was not wildlife, although after watching one bounce out of the pothole and veer briefly towards the verge, I conceded that there were similarities.

The first photographic session was remarkable. Margaret positioned herself discreetly beside the hedge, which in her case meant crouching behind a hydrangea holding equipment capable of photographing the surface of the moon. A silver estate car approached. She lifted the camera and suddenly there came a furious clicking noise as the vehicle entered the pothole, its front wheel disappeared, the suspension compressed and the driver experienced what I imagine was a brief but complete reassessment of his afternoon.

Margaret examined the pictures.

“What setting is that?” Jean asked.

“Sports action.”

That was the moment the pothole ceased to be road maintenance and became an event.

We developed standards. A vehicle merely brushing the edge did not count. People deliberately driving into it after clearly seeing it were regarded as poor sportsmanship. Delivery vans were common enough not to excite us unless travelling unusually quickly, while camper vans remained dependable crowd-pleasers because cupboards and crockery seemed to become involved. Nobody kept a written score because I refused to allow matters to descend to that level, although Effie did once remark that Thursday had been “better than Monday,” which suggested an informal league table existed in her head.

It was during one of these afternoons that Mr Gunn discovered us. He had been mowing the front grass and apparently became suspicious after noticing that every time a vehicle approached the house, four women stopped talking and turned their heads in exactly the same direction. This would probably have remained unexplained had a delivery van not appeared just then. The van hit the pothole. Margaret’s camera erupted into sports action mode. Effie made a small noise of appreciation.

Mr Gunn stopped the mower.

He looked at the road. Then he looked at us. Then he abandoned the mower entirely and came over. The table was covered in an assortment of teapots, mismatched china, shortbread tins, cake plates, handbags, camera equipment, phones and binoculars, as though a church tea had somehow merged with a press box.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I said we were having tea.

Mr Gunn surveyed the table. Jean was holding a plate of shortbread. Effie had positioned herself with the best view of the pothole. Margaret had a camera with a lens approximately the size of a drainpipe resting on her knee.

“Having tea,” he repeated.

“Yes,” I said. “Just having tea.”

He looked at the road again. “And the camera?”

“Margaret likes photography.”

There are occasions in marriage when providing additional information can only weaken one's position, so I poured him a cup of tea instead. Another car approached. We all remained admirably composed. It avoided the pothole completely.

Mr Gunn watched it disappear.

“Huh,” he said.

Within half an hour he was telling Margaret that she ought to increase her shutter speed.

The difficulty with an activity involving several women is that secrecy eventually becomes impossible. Jean had taken a short video on her phone during one of the better incidents, not because we were documenting anything, she explained, but because she happened to have her phone in her hand when a large motorhome arrived. This explanation would have been more convincing had the resulting film not begun twelve seconds before the motorhome reached the pothole.

Jean sent the clip to Elspeth.

Elspeth watched it three times and asked whether there were any more.

This should have been the moment when one of us recognised that matters were getting out of hand. Instead, Jean sent her another one.

By the end of the afternoon Elspeth had received a white van, two hatchbacks and something involving a roof box which produced such an extraordinary noise from the rear of the vehicle that nobody could decide whether it had come from the suspension or the luggage. Elspeth began sending messages asking what time the next session was. The following day she appeared in person with a folding chair.

Agnes found out because Elspeth told her. Agnes objected strongly to the entire business on the grounds that it was unkind to motorists, potentially intrusive and not the sort of thing grown women ought to be doing with their afternoons. She maintained this position until a courier van hit the pothole while she was standing at our gate. After that she came over and asked whether there was any tea left.

Morag was more complicated because she was spending part of the summer at the house on the island. She did not know anything about the pothole until somebody — and nobody has ever admitted responsibility — sent her Jean's motorhome video.

My telephone rang almost immediately.

“What is this?”

I told her it was a motorhome.

“I can see it’s a motorhome. What are you all doing?”

“Nothing.”

“You are filming cars going into a pothole.”

“We’re having tea.”

There was a silence.

“Without me?”

This, apparently, was the offence.

Morag demanded everything. Not an explanation. The footage. Jean sent the white van. Elspeth sent the roof-box incident. Margaret photographed her camera screen and sent a sequence of still images from the silver estate car. Within an hour Morag, sitting on an island several miles away, had become our remote analyst.

She was extremely critical of the filming.

“Too much hedge,” she wrote beneath one clip.

On another: “You’ve moved before the back wheel goes in.”

Then: “WHO FILMED THIS VERTICALLY?”

Jean was offended.

Morag said if we were going to do this, we could at least do it properly.

I reminded everyone that there was no “this.”

Nobody responded.

Rhona, meanwhile, was in Benidorm.

This information became relevant only because Elspeth accidentally sent the white-van video to the entire group rather than to Morag. Rhona replied several minutes later with a photograph of herself sitting somewhere extremely sunny beside a swimming pool, wearing sunglasses and holding a large glass of something orange.

“Excellent,” she wrote. “Any camper vans today?”

It was still the middle of the afternoon at home. Rhona pointed out that Spain was an hour ahead and therefore she was entitled to have moved on from tea.

After that the pothole acquired an overseas audience. At approximately three o’clock each afternoon, if anything worthwhile occurred, somebody sent it to Rhona. She began requesting slow-motion replays. On one occasion a small red car went into the pothole particularly hard and Rhona replied with three cocktail-glass symbols and the number nine.

“What does nine mean?” I asked.

“Score,” said Effie.

“We are not scoring them.”

Nobody answered.

Agnes continued to disapprove while somehow never missing an afternoon.

That was in August. By early September, pothole afternoons had become sufficiently established that nobody needed formally to arrange them. If the weather was decent, somebody appeared. Tea was made. Chairs were taken outside. Conversation continued normally until the sound of an engine came round the bend, at which point an extraordinary concentration descended over otherwise respectable women.

Then it turned colder.

At first we attempted to continue. We wore cardigans. Then coats. Jean brought a blanket for her knees, which I thought indicated that matters had gone too far, although I accepted it ten minutes later. The tea became cold almost immediately. Margaret complained that her fingers were too stiff to operate the camera properly. Effie maintained that we could sit outside perfectly comfortably while visibly shivering.

Last week we finally admitted defeat. Rain was blowing sideways across the garden and the temperature had fallen to the point where even Mr Gunn, who believes central heating before October represents a moral failure, went inside, turned on the heat, and insisted that we come indoors.

We sat inside instead. All four of us looked towards the window.

“You can still see from here,” Effie said.

I told her it was not the same.

And it isn't. Anyone can look through a window. Pothole season was about sitting outside with tea, pretending to discuss ordinary matters while waiting for an unsuspecting Vauxhall to appear around the bend. It was about grown women becoming entirely silent because a stranger was about to discover something we already knew.

The council may eventually repair it. I assume that remains the official ambition. But after three reports, an entire summer, several hundred cups of tea and what Morag now describes as an inadequate archive of usable footage, I have accepted that the pothole is probably staying.

Pothole season, however, is officially over.

Not because the council fixed the road.

Because Scotland fixed the weather.