

CAVENDISH

Scottish Labour.

2026 Manifesto Analysis



Why this election matters.

The Scottish Parliament election on 7 May is shaping up as a contest defined less by competing visions and more by voter disengagement.

Polling shows the SNP just about securing an outright majority, the first Holyrood majority since Alex Salmond's 2011 landslide. But beneath the headline numbers lies a different story: widespread apathy, high undecideds, and anxious parties worried that low turnout could produce unpredictable results.

Turnout is the central anxiety. Five years ago, the Covid election saw turnout hit a record high of over 63%. This time, all parties expect significantly lower participation. Senior SNP figures have privately admitted the election feels "flat" - with unusually high numbers of voters refusing to vote at all, few visible campaign signs, little street activity, and no dominant issues driving engagement. One SNP source noted an unexpectedly high number of undecideds across the political spectrum.

Labour faces particular challenges. The party has struggled to articulate a clear central offer beyond generic pledges to be more competent and cut waste. Anas Sarwar's approval rating (minus 29) is the lowest since the last general election. While he frames the contest as a "presidential" race between his energy and John Swinney's "tired leadership", Swinney actually polls better on the question of who is doing a good job (minus 7 vs minus 29).

For clients, the election matters less because of who will govern (a SNP win is likely) and more because of what it signals about engagement, mandate strength, and the opposition environment that will emerge. A low-turnout SNP win creates political vulnerability on specific issues - particularly public service delivery and cost of living - even if the opposition lacks the seats to force policy change. And Labour's difficulty articulating a clear offer suggests the party will be a weaker opposition voice than either the Conservatives or Reform.

What Scottish Labour are proposing:

The manifesto in brief

Labour's manifesto is built around the argument that Scotland's public services have declined, not because of ideology, but because of management failure and lack of economic growth. They say the cure is competent government focused on delivery: better planning, better use of existing spending, and deliberate economic investment.

The party opens with a clear plan of 20 headline commitments spanning health, education, childcare, business, infrastructure, housing, and governance. These commitments reflect Labour's core argument: that growth and efficient management are the routes to better public services, not spending expansion or ideological reform.

The funding model relies on three pillars: economic growth (Labour claims its policies could increase GDP by 2.1-2.4% and unlock £600-700m by 2030/31), efficiency savings (£200m by 2030/31 from quango cuts and NHS productivity improvements), and existing budgets reallocated toward priorities. Labour explicitly commits to no income tax rises for five years and frames future tax cuts as possible if growth is delivered.

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Major policy commitments include:

- **NHS and health:** Guarantee 48-hour GP appointments and bring back the family doctor. End the 8am rush for appointments. Reduce health boards from 14 to 3 to cut bureaucracy. Invest in AI-enabled scanners for cancer detection. Establish an emergency mental health response service (paramedics and mental health professionals, not police). Legislate for Milly's Law to improve patient safety and accountability.
- **Housing:** Deliver 125,000 new homes by 2031 across all tenures, with 52,300 affordable homes. Create a dedicated Housing Bank and Housing Development Trusts as lead developers for each region. Treat housing as critical national infrastructure and use zonal planning to pre-approve projects. Increase LBTT relief threshold to £200,000, saving first-time buyers up to £1,100.
- **Energy and nuclear:** Remove the "ideological block" on new nuclear energy and support small modular reactors. Support expansion of renewable energy (wind, hydro, solar, tidal). Introduce a new Marine Plan with spatial approach to clarify roles of offshore wind, fishing, and coastal communities.
- **Skills and apprenticeships:** Create 9,000 new apprenticeship places. Establish Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence in colleges. Introduce a Digital Skills Passport so workers can record qualifications and move between jobs. Create a statutory skills board to align apprenticeships with economic need.
- **Transport and infrastructure:** Invest £350m to repair roads and fix potholes. Dual the A9 by 2035 and commission business cases for A75/A77. Deliver the Glasgow airport rail link as a national priority. Bring local bus services back under public control through fast-track franchising. Merge CMAL and CalMac into a single public ferry agency.
- **Agriculture and rural support:** Modernise agricultural support system to balance food production with environmental outcomes. Cap tier 1 payments to larger businesses; redistribute to smaller farmers and crofters. Invest in local abattoirs and fish processing facilities. Review crofting legislation to keep it accessible for the next generation. Treat food and drink as strategic economic assets.

**Sector
implications.**

Energy and Net Zero.

What Scottish Labour is proposing

- Remove the "ideological block" on new nuclear energy; **support small modular reactors**
- Support **expansion of renewable energy generation** (wind, pumped hydro, solar, tidal)
- Cut decision times for renewables projects; **classify grid build as national planning priority**
- Introduce a **new Marine Plan** with spatial, not sector-specific, approach
- Establish a **Marine Recovery Fund** funded through developer contributions
- Support **transition plans for key industrial sites** (Grangemouth, Mossmorran)
- Improve **skills passporting for offshore workers** between oil and gas and renewables
- Plan for the energy sector within **industrial strategy**
- Back the **transition in the North East** with £40m funding over the parliament

What it means

Labour's Scottish energy position is pragmatic and growth-focused rather than ideologically driven. The party backs both nuclear and renewables, framing both as economic opportunities rather than environmental constraints. This positioning aligns broadly with the UK Labour Government's energy strategy, which similarly supports new nuclear (including small modular reactors) and renewable expansion within the net zero framework by 2035.

However, there are subtle but material differences. The UK Government has framed its energy policy explicitly within decarbonisation targets and net zero delivery. Scottish Labour's framing is more economically than environmentally driven - the emphasis is on jobs, investment, and industrial transition rather than climate targets. The manifesto mentions net zero by 2045 as the framework but prioritizes "food production, biodiversity and maintaining thriving rural communities" alongside emissions reduction in agricultural support, whereas Westminster's approach has been more assertive on net zero timelines and targets.

For renewable energy developers, Labour offers a clearer permitting pathway and explicit support for grid expansion and Marine Plans. For oil and gas supply chains, Labour offers managed transition support (transition loans, skills passporting) but not the full backing that Conservatives/Reform propose. For industrial operators at sites like Grangemouth, Labour commits to "support transition plans" but within the framework of net zero achievement by 2045, not net zero reversal.

The Marine Plan and Marine Recovery Fund are significant for maritime and offshore operators. The spatial approach (rather than sector-specific) suggests clearer zoning and reduced conflict between offshore wind, fishing, and other marine uses. Developer contributions to the Marine Recovery Fund creates a cost requirement but provides structured funding for marine habitat restoration.

For energy-intensive manufacturing, Labour's position on affordability is less direct than Conservative/Reform rhetoric. Labour frames energy affordability as secondary to economic growth and grid investment. Costs will fall as the system scales, the party argues, not through abandoning net zero. This is a different pitch than Conservatives make but still implies near-term costs for energy users.



Health and social care.

What Scottish Labour is proposing

- End 8am GP rush; bring back **family doctor**; **guarantee 48-hour appointments**, and **double general practice funding** to deliver continuity of care
- Drive down waiting lists through: **funding following the patient**, NHS capacity purchasing, Super Saturdays, off-peak scanning, opening **five National Treatment Centres**
- Reduce delayed discharge through **300 step-down beds in care homes** and **1,000 care at home packages**
- Establish **10-year workforce plan** with "train here, stay here" policy
- Deliver **£15/hour minimum pay for social care workers**
- **Reduce number of health boards** from 14 to 3
- Create **virtual hospital for outpatient consultations** and **speed up NHS app rollout** (available in all health boards within first 100 days)
- Invest in **AI-enabled scanners** for cancer detection
- Create **emergency mental health response service** (paramedics and mental health professionals, not police), and roll out **walk-in mental health hubs**
- Legislate for **Milly's Law** (independent public advocate for bereaved families)
- Introduce **Women's Health Charter** (single-sex wards, female GP access, improved maternity care)
- **Scrap Minimum Unit Pricing**; increase addiction services funding, close drug consumption room and expand residential rehab
- Restore **NHS dentistry** and end "dental deserts"
- **Remove non-residential care charges**

What it means

Labour's health offer is built on expanding public sector capacity and restructuring the NHS around primary care and local delivery. Unlike approaches that rely on private sector purchasing, Labour is proposing to fundamentally reshape NHS Scotland.

The reduction of health boards from 14 to 3 is operationally significant. This consolidates purchasing power, simplifies accountability, and creates larger contract opportunities - but for fewer suppliers. Health supply chains should prepare for larger, fewer customers. The centralisation of planning creates both efficiency gains and reduced local responsiveness.

The NHS app acceleration and AI scanner investment represent procurement opportunities for health tech companies. The virtual hospital concept (outpatient consultations delivered remotely) is explicitly designed to reduce patient travel and clinical pressure. For telemedicine platforms, remote monitoring providers, and diagnostic tech companies.



Housing, planning and property.

What Scottish Labour is proposing

- Deliver **125,000 new homes by 2031** across all tenures
- Create a **dedicated Housing Bank** within the Scottish National Investment Bank, and establish **Housing Development Trusts** to act as lead developer for each region
- Treat **housing as critical national infrastructure**; use zonal planning to pre-approve projects
- Reintroduce **presumption in favour of sustainable development**; reform NPF4
- Identify “**grey belt**” sites for development (not impacting green belt)
- **Review building regulation standardisation** to reduce costs
- Establish fit-for-purpose **local housebuilding targets**
- Build **52,300 affordable homes** within 125,000 total
- Build **20,300+ mid-market rent homes** (saving tenants £2,700/year vs market)
- **Increase LBTT relief** threshold to £200,000 for first-time buyers (saving ~£1,100)
- Set aside 5,000 mid-market rent homes for savers purchasing deposits
- **Consolidate rural housing funds**; ensure 10% of new homes in genuinely rural areas
- Expand **modular home pilots** for temporary accommodation
- Grant homeowners more control over factoring; strengthen factoring regulation
- **Improve tenement maintenance arrangements**, speed up **cladding remediation** and **protect social tenants from damp and mould**

What it means

Labour's housing offer is supply-focused and planning-focused. The party is proposing to unlock land, simplify planning, and create public-sector development capacity. For housebuilders and developers, the implications are material but mixed.

The zoning planning and presumption in favour of sustainable development create faster approval pathways for projects in designated zones. But the housing targets (125,000 homes) and the Housing Development Trusts model create direct public-sector competition. Regional Housing Development Trusts will act as lead developers - meaning the Scottish Government becomes a competitor in the development market, particularly for mid-market rent and affordable housing.

The planning reform (zonal planning, presumption in favour of sustainable development, reviewing standardisation of building regulations) is explicitly designed to accelerate approvals. For developers with stalled projects or pipeline sites, Labour's planning approach removes process friction.



FMCG, food & drink, and tourism.

What Scottish Labour is proposing

- Treat **food and drink as strategic economic asset**
- Establish an **industrial strategy** that prioritises food and drink
- Market **Scotland as premium food and drink destination**, leveraging whisky and salmon
- Support **local abattoirs and fish processing facilities**; commission strategic **review of processing investment**
- Modernise agricultural support system to ensure **public money supports food production, biodiversity, and rural communities**
- Reform **fishing quota management** to support local governance and sustainable practices
- Create **statutory skills board** with role advising on apprenticeships and skills measures

What it means

Labour's food and drink positioning is supportive and growth-focused. The party frames food and drink as a strategic economic asset and commits to supporting local processing infrastructure (abattoirs, fish processing).

For whisky and spirits exporters, Labour's position is explicitly supportive. The party commits to treating food and drink as a strategic sector within industrial strategy and to marketing Scotland as a premium food and drink destination globally. This signals government backing for export promotion and trade delegation support.

For farmers and food producers, the agricultural support system modernisation is significant. Labour commits to ensuring public money supports "food production, biodiversity and maintaining thriving rural communities." This differs from approaches that subordinate food production to environmental outcomes. Labour's framing is balanced - environmental outcomes alongside productive agriculture.

The tier 1 payment cap (largest businesses get less) and redistribution to smaller enterprises represents a shift toward supporting smaller producers and crofters. For smaller food and drink producers, this signals potential increased support; for larger agricultural operations, it signals margin pressure on public support payments.



Farming and rural affairs.

What Scottish Labour is proposing

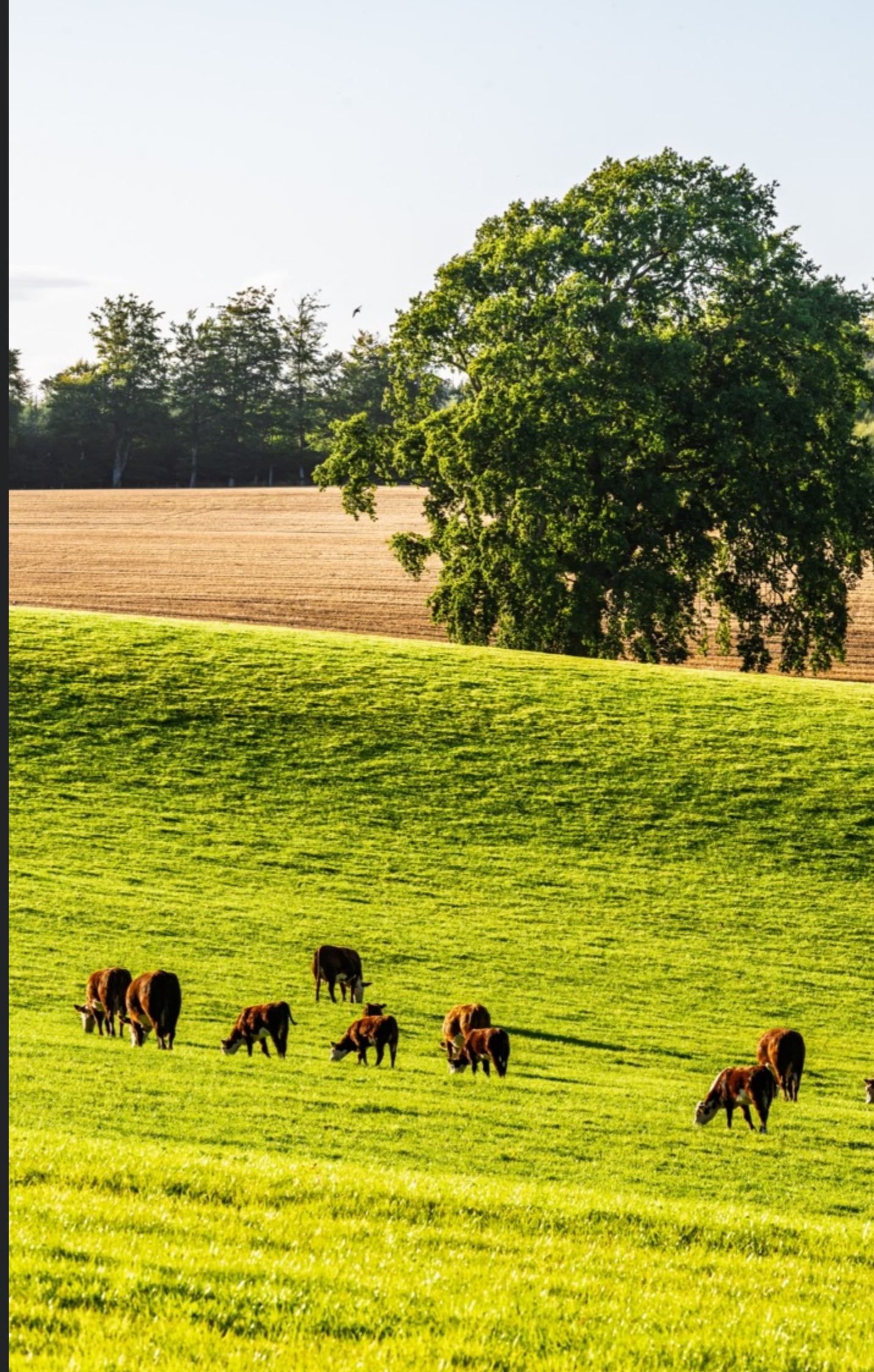
- Modernise agricultural support system to be **"fit for purpose and fairer for all"**
- Ensure public money for farming supports **food production, biodiversity, and maintaining thriving rural communities**
- Support smaller farmers and crofters by **capping tier 1 payments**; redistribute to smaller enterprises
- Phase in changes so no producers face cliff edges
- **Invest in local abattoirs and fish processing facilities**
- Commission **strategic review of processing investment**
- **Review crofting legislation** to keep it accessible for next generation
- **Reform fishing quota management** with more local governance and sustainable practices
- Develop forestry and timber industry; **increase home-grown timber use**; balance timber industry needs with **native woodland expansion**
- Support sustainable and data-informed fisheries with **remote electronic monitoring**
- Conduct **sustainable deer management**; continue incentive pilots and support community initiatives
- Reward farmers for nature-friendly practices; **incentivise nature restoration**
- Establish **Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence** in colleges around the country
- Set up **regional Skills Accelerators**

What it means

Labour's agricultural positioning is supportive but conditional on net zero alignment. The party is not reversing net zero or environmental criteria; it is proposing to rebalance support toward food production and smaller producers while maintaining environmental outcomes.

For farmers, the agricultural support system modernisation is significant. Labour commits to making the system "fit for purpose and fairer for all." The tier 1 payment cap and redistribution to smaller enterprises signals a shift in support allocation. Larger agricultural operations will see less support; smaller farmers and crofters will benefit. The phasing-in of changes is important - Labour commits to avoiding cliff edges, which means transition support for larger operations affected by the shift.

The Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence and regional Skills Accelerators signal investment in rural skills development. For training providers and colleges in rural areas, this represents demand signal and potential funding.



Transport.

What Scottish Labour is proposing

- Establish **£350m pothole and road maintenance fund**
- **Dual the A9 by 2035**; commission business case for A75 and A77 dualling
- Create **National Roads Plan** prioritising upgrades based on economic need and local connectivity
- Bring **local bus services back under public control**; fast-track franchising
- Deliver reliable ferry services; **merge CMAL and CalMac** into single public ferry agency
- **Upgrade Scotland's road network** with 10-year approach
- Deliver **integrated smart ticketing** across Scotland
- Deliver better rail network: **no return to peak fares, continued electrification, fast intercity rail corridor** (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow)
- Deliver **Glasgow airport rail link**
- Create **National Transport Connections Plan** to identify priority projects

What it means

Labour's transport position is infrastructure-focused and rail-prioritised. The party commits to major road and rail investment but frames public transport (buses, rail, ferries) as core infrastructure rather than supplementary to car travel.

For road contractors, the £350m pothole fund and A9/A75/A77 dualling commitments represent material opportunity. The National Roads Plan will prioritise projects based on economic need and local connectivity - explicit criteria for project selection. This removes some uncertainty from planning timelines.

The bus franchising commitment is significant. Bringing local bus services back under public control means councils become operators. For existing private bus operators, this represents potential loss of contracts. For bus engineering and fleet suppliers, it represents continued demand but from council-operated services with different procurement practices.

The rail commitments (electrification, fast intercity corridor, Glasgow airport link) are infrastructure-heavy. For rail contractors and engineering firms, this is material opportunity. The "no return to peak fares" commitment signals ongoing operating subsidies to ScotRail.

The Glasgow airport rail link specifically is a long-promised project; Labour's explicit commitment to advance it "as a national priority" and "finally delivering" it signals intention to resolve the delays that have characterised its history.



How Cavendish can help.

We advise clients across public affairs and corporate reputation. Our team combines deep knowledge of the Scottish political environment with sector expertise across energy, health, housing, food and drink, and rural affairs.

If you would like a tailored conversation about what the Scottish Parliament election means for your organisation - whether that is updating your stakeholder strategy, assessing policy risk, or building an engagement programme for the new parliament - we would be glad to talk.

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