

CAVENDISH

Scottish Liberal Democrats.

2026 Manifesto Analysis



Why this election matters.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats are polling at 4-8% and unlikely to win a large number of seats. However, the party explicitly positions itself as a potential coalition partner or leverage point in a hung parliament.

The manifesto repeatedly emphasises that "every vote for the Scottish Liberal Democrats on the second peach ballot paper will deliver change with fairness at its heart" – a direct appeal to voters to use the regional list vote to strengthen Liberal Democrat leverage.

The party's recent parliamentary history is crucial context. The manifesto lists specific concessions secured through budget negotiations: £178 million rates relief, £70 million additional college funding, £2.5 million young entrepreneurs funding, £14.4 million hospice funding across two budgets, funding for autism/ADHD assessments, investment in ferry services. This is a calculated claim that Liberal Democrats leverage – even with few seats – translates into tangible wins.

A Liberal Democrat voice in coalition or confidence-and-supply arrangement would prioritise business rates reform, education investment, healthcare efficiency, decentralisation to local government, and pragmatic approach to energy policy (including support for SMRs, opposed by SNP/Greens). The party's fiscal conservatism (emphasis on "value for money," scepticism about unaffordable promises) signals caution on major spending commitments.

The manifesto's central claim is that Scotland "simply isn't working" – and that the solution is decentralisation, pragmatism, and delivery focused on practical problems rather than constitutional politics. The manifesto is notably absent a "nationalism/anti-independence" message beyond the final line ("Oppose independence and a second independence referendum"). Instead, it's focused on practical governance failure. This suggests the Liberal Democrats believe the independence debate has fatigued voters, and that focusing on potholes, ferries, NHS waiting times, and school standards is more electorally promising than constitutional argument.

The Liberal Democrats' distinctive pitch is: Scotland's problem isn't constitutional but managerial. The SNP has centralised power, wasted money, failed on delivery (ferries, NHS waiting times, education standards). The solution is devolving power to communities, cutting waste, and focusing government on practical outcomes. This is a powerful counter-narrative to independence talk and offers clients a clear signal of what Liberal Democrat governance would prioritise.

What the Scottish Lib Dems are proposing:

The manifesto in brief

The manifesto is structured around five themes: cost of living, health, transport, education, and political reform. The party frames Scotland's problem as SNP managerial failure: centralisation of power, waste of public money, and broken delivery on the things voters actually care about.

Cost of living and housing: Emergency insulation programme; accelerated heat pump and district heating rollout; 25,000 homes built annually; 10,000 key worker homes; Job Transition Loans (up to £5,000); business rates reform to protect viable businesses from sudden steep increases; UK-EU customs union.

Health: 900 new multidisciplinary staff embedded in GP practices; NHS dentistry restoration; mental health expansion (walk-in services, specialist training, dedicated beds north of Dundee); lung cancer screening; Fair Deal for Rural Healthcare; reduced delayed discharge through social care investment.

Transport: Ferries Bill (30-year statutory infrastructure strategy, independent governance, community voice); Dangerous Roads Programme (data-driven trigger system); Transport for London model for local bus services; ScotRail commuter guarantee and late-night services; A9 and A96 acceleration; EV charging expansion.

Education: 2,000 new pupil support assistants; smartphone-free schools legislation; teacher contract reform (ending zero-hours); play-based learning to age 7; Pupil Equity Funding made permanent; college funding boost (building on £70 million secured).

Political reform: Accountability Act codifying ministerial standards; power devolved from Scottish Government to councils with multi-year funding settlements; FOI rules strengthened and extended to private companies delivering public services; consultancy spending halved; voting system changed to STV.

**Sector
implications.**

Energy and Net Zero.

What the Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing

- Emergency insulation programme with catch-up zones for lagging areas
- Fairer Heating Bill accelerating heat pumps, district heating, fabric-first retrofitting
- Double training of heating engineers to become qualified heat pump installers
- Overhauling community benefit rules so local people get materially more of the money companies make from renewable energy generated near them
- Transfer ScotWind rental income directly to nearby councils
- New rules for future ScotWind-style sales: local content requirements, supply chain pacing, community benefit guaranteed, public-private partnership options including government "at cost" stake in projects
- Quadruple solar generation this parliament (rooftops, public buildings, car parks)
- Support green hydrogen, tidal/wave power, pumped storage hydro growth
- Grid infrastructure modernisation with community partnership and Energy Insight Fund
- **Remove ideological opposition to Small Modular Reactors (SMRs)**, subjecting them to same whole-life assessment as other energy forms
- Carbon capture and storage industry development (targeting ~15,000 jobs at peak)
- Replace Energy Profits Levy with stable, fair, proportional system with predictable tax rate variation
- Oppose fracking and new shale gas

What it means

The Scottish Liberal Democrats' energy positioning is distinctive and pragmatic. Unlike the SNP (cautiously backing case-by-case North Sea decisions) or the Greens (opposing all new oil/gas), the Lib Dems are explicitly pro-SMR and cautiously pro-carbon capture.

The SMR support is a major differentiator from SNP/Greens. For nuclear supply chains, this would open up a market that the SNP opposes. The manifesto notes SMRs would support "up to 3,000 jobs per project at peak construction." The approach is to subject SMRs to "same tests" as other energy forms (whole-life approach to risk, environmental impact, cost, decommissioning, legacy) rather than blanket opposition. And the carbon capture and storage industry support (targeting ~15,000 jobs) is economically driven rather than purely climate-focused.

The community benefit overhauling extends to housing: the manifesto explicitly links renewable energy investment proceeds to funding local housing. For housing associations and councils in areas hosting renewable development, this creates a new revenue source. For developers, it is an additional obligation but with structured and flexible delivery mechanisms.



Health and social care.

What the Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing

- 900 new multidisciplinary staff embedded in GP practices and neighbourhood health teams (nurses, physios, pharmacists, dieticians, phlebotomists, mental health professionals, counsellors) – equivalent to giving every GP practice an additional clinical member of staff
- Rolling 10-year NHS Workforce Plan
- Health and Social Care Staff Assembly putting frontline expertise at heart of policy
- NHS dentistry restoration (training overseas-qualified dentists, care home regular visits, enhanced dental nurses and technicians)
- Mental health walk-in services learning from SAMH's Nook network; dedicated beds for children and young people north of Dundee
- Lung cancer screening programme capable of saving hundreds of lives per year
- Fair Deal for Rural Healthcare: clinical networks giving rural professionals peer support, decentralised model, local decision-making
- Delayed discharge reduction through 7-day discharge model, social care investment, and welfare power of attorney campaign
- National Accountability Act for NHS IT interoperability; comprehensive NHS App rollout
- Replace Edinburgh Eye Pavilion and Belford Hospital (both projects restarted through Lib Dem budget negotiations); replace Gilbert Bain Hospital in Shetland
- Long COVID/ME specialist support (£4.5 million annually secured in 2025/26 budget)
- Hospice support: NHS pay parity, new funding model co-development, children's hospice fair deal
- Weight loss medication access through NHS where GPs agree
- Private provider engagement where services reduce waiting times and complement NHS – but never compromising universal free care

What it means

The Lib Dems' health offer is primarily about adding capacity to primary care without structural reorganisation. Unlike Labour (which proposes reducing health boards from 14 to 3), the Lib Dems are not proposing major institutional change. The 900 new multidisciplinary staff in GP practices is the centrepiece – a tangible number, broadly costed, and designed to be felt at practice level rather than through reorganisation.

There is no major procurement restructuring, no consolidation of boards into larger contract units. Suppliers will be dealing with the same number of health boards, but with modestly enhanced primary care budgets and a new emphasis on community-based multidisciplinary teams. For suppliers of allied health professional training, pharmacy services, physiotherapy, dietetics, and counselling, the embedded staff model creates sustained demand.

The Fair Deal for Rural Healthcare is genuinely distinctive. Rather than centralising specialist services (the historical trend), the Lib Dems commit to clinical networks giving rural professionals peer support and a decentralised model where decisions are taken as close to communities as possible.



Housing, planning and property.

What the Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing

- Return housebuilding to 25,000 homes per year average (up from current ~10,000-15,000)
- 10,000 dedicated key worker homes in partnership with private sector and councils (mid-market rents, eligibility decided locally)
- Net Zero New Towns programme: rail links, biodiversity, district heating, 20-minute neighbourhoods from the outset
- Help to Renovate loan scheme: bringing neglected properties back into use, targeting first-time buyers and low-emission outcomes
- Social renting re-established as long-term option: multi-year grant certainty for RSLs and housing associations
- Innovative financing: Lar Housing Trust loan-based model for mid-market rent; Help to Build stewardship using pension funds to reduce upfront costs
- Planning reform: NPF4 reform to ensure sufficient land, fewer pre-approval reports for SME builders, standardised home designs pre-approved by planners, forced sale of derelict sites, simplified redevelopment of long-term derelict buildings
- Community benefit revenue from renewable energy used to fund local housing
- Key worker housing eligibility decided locally (nurses, care workers, teachers, engineers based on council need)
- Brownfield land assessment and community plot-by-plot sale for self-build
- LBTT exemptions for difficult brownfield sites and older people downsizing
- Grenfell cladding removal timetable and milestones

What it means

The Lib Dems' housing strategy is supply-led and planning-focused. The 25,000 homes per year target is ambitious – significantly above current delivery – and requires both planning reform and new financing mechanisms to achieve. For housebuilders and developers, the combination of NPF4 reform (more land, fewer pre-approval requirements), standardised pre-approved designs, forced derelict site sales, and streamlined brownfield redevelopment addresses the key barriers to increasing supply.

The Net Zero New Towns programme is operationally specific and materially different from incremental housebuilding. The commitment to rail links, district heating, biodiversity, and 20-minute neighbourhoods from the outset means developers need to plan these elements in from concept rather than retrofit them post-approval. For infrastructure providers this creates early-stage involvement demand in what would be major site developments. The rental sector positioning is notably non-interventionist compared to Greens or Labour. The manifesto commits to "restoring confidence in the private rented sector" without specifying rent controls or regulatory changes. This signals the Lib Dems' preference for supply-side solutions – more homes, lower pressure – rather than regulatory controls.



FMCG and food & drink.

What the Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing

- Support Food Supply Chain Fairness Bill for fairer prices for farmers and food producers, with new checks on supermarket power
- Bespoke UK-EU customs union (easing export friction for agricultural and food products to EU markets)
- Industrial strategy prioritising food and drink, life sciences, energy, fintech, defence
- Overhaul public sector procurement policies to support local suppliers and micro-bidders
- Fair Payment Code for contractors and government-owned companies (fair payment for small suppliers)
- Hospitality sector: independent review of non-domestic property valuation methodology for licensed premises (building on £178 million rates relief secured by Lib Dems in 2026/27 budget)
- Building on business rates reform with specific relief measures for pubs, restaurants, hotels, music venues, clubs
- High street support: Retail Crime Taskforce investment, exempting last bank in town from business rates, shared banking services
- Improved transport infrastructure (roads, ferries) to reduce logistical friction for businesses
- Rural food and drink: support for small abattoirs, farm diversification (agritourism, renewable energy, change of use)
- Tourism: Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund; formal TV/film tourism programmes with streaming platforms; major events pipeline (£110 million through 2030, including Commonwealth Games, Tour de France Grand Départ, UEFA EURO 2028)
- Champion whisky and key Scottish exports (removing UK-EU barriers post-customs union)

What it means

The Lib Dems' food and drink positioning is business-friendly and export-focused. The customs union proposal is the single largest policy lever for Scottish food and drink exporters – current post-Brexit barriers create significant friction for beef, lamb, dairy, seafood, and whisky destined for EU markets. A bespoke customs union with the EU would substantially reduce this friction and is directly relevant to exporters whose EU market access has contracted since 2020.

The Food Supply Chain Fairness Bill is operationally material for food producers and processors. It would introduce new checks on supermarket buyer power – addressing a longstanding complaint that supermarkets squeeze supplier margins through delayed payments, unilateral contract changes, and unjustified delistings.



Farming and rural affairs.

What the Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing

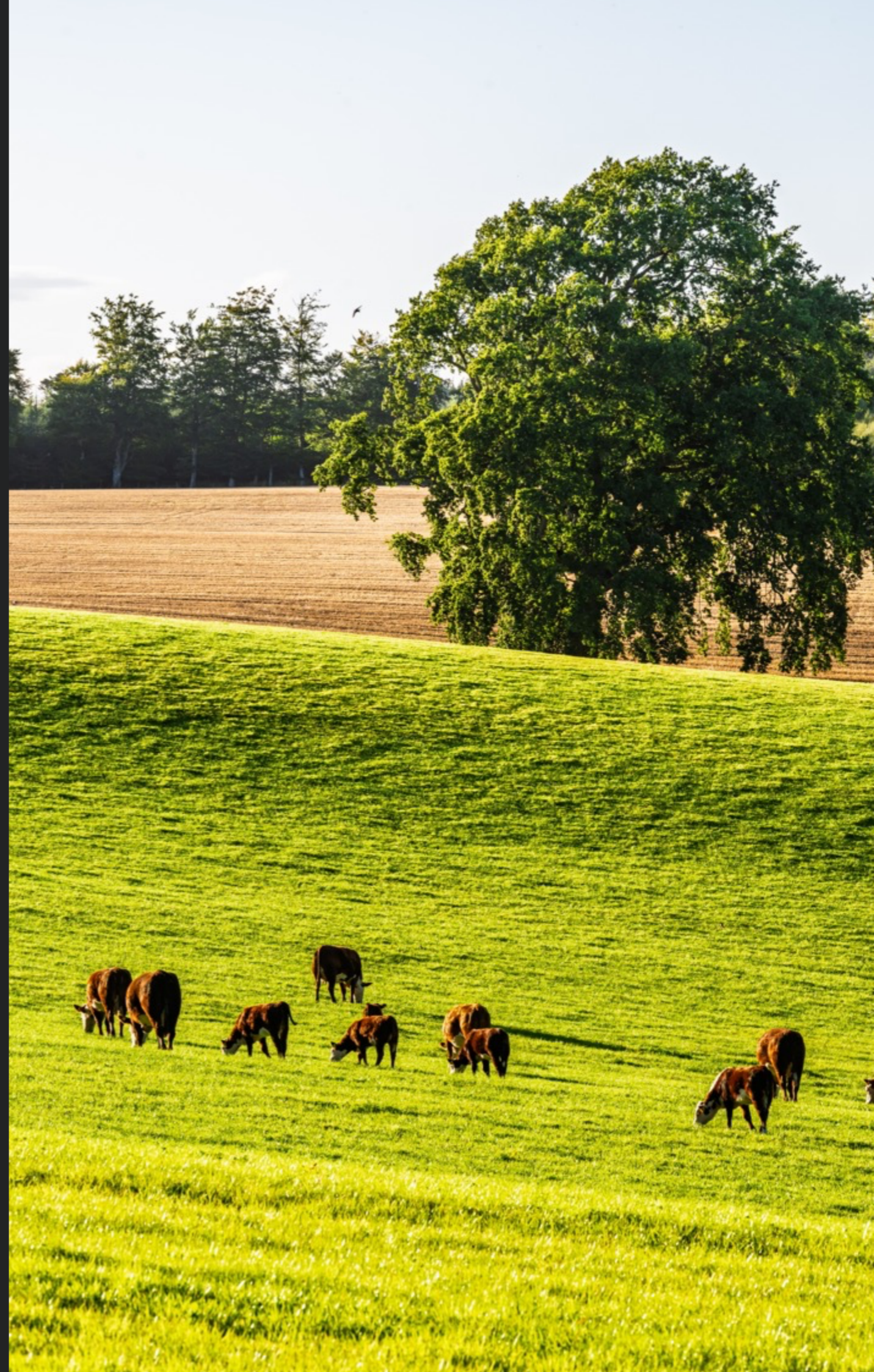
- UK agricultural investment increased by £1 billion annually, with money flowing to Scottish Government
- Ring-fenced agriculture funding, protected support payments, 3-year funding deals for planning certainty
- Support Food Supply Chain Fairness Bill for fairer farm gate prices
- Bespoke UK-EU veterinary and sanitary/phytosanitary agreements (reducing export friction for livestock and food products)
- Champion removal of family farm tax
- Gene editing technology permitted in Scotland (reducing costs, improving resilience)
- NextGen scheme: clear career paths and a salaried year of sustainable farming experience for new entrants
- Farm Advisory Service expansion: digital innovation, precision agriculture, skills development, research dissemination from Scotland's rural research institutes
- Farm diversification barriers removed (on-farm renewables, agritourism, building change of use, worker housing)
- Support small abattoir provision (co-designed with farming organisations)
- River catchment plans (partnership with farmers and landowners for drought/flooding management)
- Crofting review and consultation within first year of parliament

What it means

The Liberal Democrats' combination of 3-year funding deals, protected support payments, and gene editing permission are designed to give farmers clearer planning certainty and access to emerging technology that other parties are more cautious about.

The UK-EU veterinary and sanitary/phytosanitary agreement priority is material for livestock producers and food processors. Current post-Brexit checks create delays and costs at the border for live animals and products of animal origin. A rapid, comprehensive agreement would substantially reduce this friction. For beef, lamb, and dairy exporters in particular – where EU market access has contracted – this is a direct economic gain.

The NextGen scheme (salaried year of sustainable farming experience for new entrants, clear career path) addresses the sector's succession challenge. For agricultural colleges and rural training providers, this creates demand.



Transport.

What the Scottish Liberal Democrats are proposing

- Ferries Bill: 30-year rolling ferry and port infrastructure strategy (approved by Parliament every five years); statutory duty to replace vessels at end of life; independent governance structure with community voice; expanded compensation for SNP fiasco impact; restore seasonal Campbeltown-Ayrshire link
- Dangerous Roads Programme: national coding system for road risk, automatic government response triggers (road policing, cameras, speed limits, resurfacing, lighting, bypasses, dualling)
- Local authority fair funding for potholes; international best practice for repair technology and lifecycle planning
- Transport for London model for local bus services: community control of when and where buses go, backed by stronger regional transport partnerships
- ScotRail: commuter-friendly guarantee protecting timetable changes, late-night services expansion, automatic delay compensation, new stations (including Newburgh in Fife), Borders Railway extension to Hawick/Carlisle
- Nationwide tap-and-go transport system (bank card access, daily spend caps across all modes)
- EV charging rollout: bank card access (no app required), streetlighting integration, presumption of EV for all public sector vehicle procurement
- Active travel: Bikeability training for all primary school children; e-scooter regulation
- Rail electrification continuation; new night train exploration
- National Freight Strategy: road to rail shift, hydrogen exploration, long-distance truck chargers, European connections

What it means

The Transport for London model for bus services represents the most significant change for bus operators. Currently, most Scottish bus services outside Lothian operate commercially, with councils subsidising unprofitable routes. A TfL model means councils specify services – routes, frequency, hours – and operators compete to deliver them. For existing private operators, this is a reduced-margin environment. For councils with fleet capacity, it signals potential in-house operation. For passengers, it means services designed around need rather than commercial viability.

The ScotRail commuter guarantee (timetable changes require consultation and impact assessment) and automatic delay compensation are material for ScotRail and its operational planning. They place constraint on scheduling flexibility but signal government commitment to rail as a commuter service rather than a residual public obligation. For businesses in rail-served corridors, this improves reliability for staff commuting.

The EV charging rollout (bank card access, no app download, streetlighting integration, public sector procurement presumption) is operationally specific and addresses the practical barriers to EV switching. For EV charging operators, the specification of bank card access and no-app requirement creates interoperability requirements. For local authorities, the streetlighting integration mandate creates infrastructure investment requirement but also a clear deployment model.



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.

enquiries@cavendishconsulting.com