



# Scottish Labour

The Change Scotland Needs

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# Gaelic

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## An Economic Plan for a Living Language



# Introduction

Gaelic continues to decline as a living language despite numerous, well-meaning government interventions over decades. If we continue on the current path, Gaelic will die as a daily language in its heartland communities within – at most – decades.

The Gaelic language is the most tangible vestige of Scotland's ancient culture of which we are all custodians. Yet it is facing an existential threat; research conducted by academics at the University of the Highlands and Islands demonstrates a sharp decline in the number of Gaelic speakers in the last 30 years, particularly amongst young people.

For years there has been a closed political consensus on the approach to the Gaelic crisis. The culture-centred approach has, to date, had limited success and so Scottish Labour believes it is time for a new perspective.

The decline of Gaelic is an economic problem with cultural consequences. Scottish Labour believes that to ensure the survival of the Gaelic language for future generations, we must first and foremost revitalise the economy of Gaelic-speaking areas.

Gaelic culture – music, literature, poetry – makes an immense contribution to our national life and that is, in part, why the language needs sustaining. The cultural sector is also a key employer in the Gaelic-speaking community, with radio and TV creating a number of jobs in the Highlands and Islands. However, Gaelic thrives when it is passed on organically, between generations and within communities and this requires a surviving community of Gaelic speakers in a thriving economy.

Scottish Labour rejects the failing consensus. We believe that now is the time for a real debate on how we see Gaelic survive and thrive.

The future of the Gaelic language in its remaining relative strongholds is intimately related to wider issues of housing, employment, land reform and transport. Scottish Labour believes that those communities must be supported as a first priority if the Gaelic language is to survive for future generations and encouraging young people to build their lives in the Highlands and Islands is the essential key to the survival of the language. Where there are no people, there is no language. That is why we have developed a series of policy proposals, set out in this document, which aim at sustaining the good jobs, affordable housing and key infrastructure that will encourage population growth in the Highlands and Islands.



## This document

The policies outlined will form the basis of a broader discussion with the Gaelic communities of Scotland. This will directly inform the party's approach to the forthcoming Languages Bill in the Scottish Parliament committed to by the current government in their Programme for Government. It will also contribute to the UK Labour Party's manifesto development for the UK General Election and will form a key plank of the Labour Party's policy forum approach to the development of the manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections.

# 1. Good homes for rural communities



The lack of suitable housing in our island and rural communities is a significant barrier for those who would want to live and work in a Gaelic-speaking community.

The existing housing stock is increasingly squeezed by the growing proportion of homes being bought up for use as second homes or holiday lets. In 2022, there were 885 second homes in Na h-Eileanan Siar and 631 long term empty homes, while in the Highlands and Argyll & Bute there were 6,765 second homes and 4,393 long term empty homes.

Fuel poverty is also disproportionately higher in rural areas, with older housing stock more inefficient and harder to keep warm. Most recent data showed that 18% of all housing stock in Na h-Eileanan Siar had an energy efficiency rate of only F or G – the highest of any local authority in Scotland.

**To ensure that good quality housing is available for the those who wish to live and work within our rural Gaelic communities Scottish Labour would:**

1. Ensure holiday residences are contributing to the local community by exempting short-term lets from the non-domestic rates relief scheme and creating a 100% council tax surcharge on second homes.
2. Support the return of empty homes to the housing market through a council tax escalator and a £1 homes scheme with powers for the council to repurpose empty residences and sell them for just £1 to people who are committed to living locally.
3. Create energy efficient housing with Labour's Warm Homes Plan and our clean energy mission which will upgrade and insulate homes so they all reach EPC C standard within a decade.
4. Examine the options for reforming the Croft House Grant to ensure crofting-specific housing needs can be met.

## 2. A resilient, reliable ferry network

Good transport links are crucial for island economies so the breakdowns, delays and cancellations to Scotland's ferry services over recent years have been hugely damaging. Not only does the lack of ferry service make business difficult, hindering exports and undermining tourism, it discourages people from living and working on the islands.

**Scottish Labour believes that building a resilient, reliable ferry network is vitally important to a thriving economy in island communities. That is why we are calling for:**

1. A resilience fund for local businesses impacted by the ferry crisis, funded by the fines paid by CalMac for cancellations.
2. A proper ferry procurement and construction plan which standardises the build specifications, forecasts ahead for the work needed to replace CalMac ageing fleet and brings new orders and opportunities to Scotland's shipbuilding industry.
3. New governance to replace the failed CMAL model and improve transparency.



# 3. Skilled workforces and thriving small businesses



In 2022, there were 10,675 small businesses in Highland Council, and 1,180 small businesses in Na h-Eileanan Siar.

While there is clearly huge economic potential in communities that support the Gaelic language, a survey conducted by the Federation of Small Businesses found that, in 2022, only 36% of rural small businesses in Scotland intended to grow their businesses over the next 12 months, citing barriers such as recruiting skilled staff and increased fuel costs.

**Scottish Labour wants to ensure that local businesses do not face unnecessary barriers to growth, and can contribute to the development of their local towns. That is why Scottish Labour is committed to:**

1. Reforming non-domestic rates to make the system fairer to small businesses and ensure that online giants pay their fair share.
2. Reviewing access to skills and training for people of all ages in the Highlands and Islands, as part of our wider response to reform skills and training provision.
3. Considering the introduction of at least one mobile

training centre to be based in the Highlands and Islands to improve access to training.

4. Assessing the reforms required to the administration and function of crofting, in recognition of the impact good crofting policy has on supporting the rural Gaelic-speaking population and the fact that many previous recommendations for reform have not been implemented.

In the long term we know that more is needed to attract Gaelic speaking workers to rural communities and into key worker posts, including Gaelic-speaking teachers. Scottish Labour will therefore review how Gaelic qualifications could be recognised within the Distant Islands Allowance, the operation of teaching bursaries with regards to recruitment to island and rural areas, as well as the availability of Gaelic education for those already living in these communities.



## 4. A just transition with community energy benefits



Much of Scotland's clean energy potential is based in rural areas, and particularly in the islands. Yet these are also the areas where energy prices and levels of fuel poverty are often highest, due to poor housing stock and distribution costs.

The Western Isles currently produces 23.1MW in community generated energy and there is estimated to be at least 50MW further of projects at various stages of development. Not only do these energy projects create secure and skilled jobs, the profits generated from energy production help support community services and assets.

**Scottish Labour wants to deliver a just transition to clean energy, with those living close to energy generation able to share in the benefits of it. That is why we will:**

1. Establish GB Energy, a publicly-owned energy generation company, headquartered in Scotland to learn from the experience and expertise of those already promoting community energy, like in the Western Isles and other Island communities.
2. Deliver community benefits from local energy with our Local Power Plan, working in partnership with GB Energy and the private sector to build clean power projects in the Islands and across Scotland, in which local communities have a stake in the profits generated.



# 5. Gaelic promotion within Scotland's creative industries

Gaelic plays an integral role in Scotland's culture – in music, literature, TV and radio. There can be significant economic benefits from a flourishing culture sector, but for that to happen, there needs to be investment and proper support. **That is why Scottish Labour is committed to:**

1. Supporting the important role that BBC Alba plays in creating jobs in rural areas and promoting Gaelic as a living language.
2. Continuing the Fèisean as a key delivery mechanism for passing on Gaelic arts and culture intergenerationally.
3. Developing a new test for the funding of individual Gaelic cultural projects to ensure that resources are granted on a strategic basis to provide stability to organisations and their staff, and to boost viability and vitality of Gaelic.



# Next Steps



Scottish Labour knows that these proposals are just the start. There is much to be done to help grow the economies of Gaelic speaking communities and this will require locally tailored solutions and policies informed by the people in these areas.

That is why Scottish Labour wants to end the creeping centralisation that has taken place under the current government. Nationally set policies are often inappropriate for more rural contexts and policies developed for urban areas do not always meet the needs of communities in the Highlands and Islands. Scottish Labour has set out plans to push power out of Westminster and Holyrood and reform local democracy so it is rooted in communities and responsive to their needs. Nowhere is this more important than in rural areas like the Highlands and Islands where local people need to be empowered and involved in local decision making.

As Scottish Labour develops our approach to promoting the Gaelic language, we are committed to working in partnership and this document marks the foundation of that discussion. In the coming months, government plans

for land reform, debates over agricultural and crofting policy, as well as the forthcoming Languages Bill will all impact the economies and future of Gaelic speaking communities. Scottish Labour is determined that our approach to all these issues will give voice to those affected and aim to grow the economies of our Highland and Island communities for the long term.





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