

OUR RIGHTS. YOUR MOVE.

Executive Summary

To inform the development of party manifestos for the Scottish Election in May 2026.

Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seek equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.

Eleanor Roosevelt, 1948

About HRCS

HRCS is Scotland's civil society human rights network and has 230 civil society/NGO members and 250 individual members. HRCS is independent of Government and is dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights.

Our mission is to bring together organisations and campaigners to work for the incorporation of international human rights standards into Scottish law and policy, to ensure delivery of human rights and accountability and develop accessible and informative resources.

HRCS plays a vital role in amplifying marginalised voices and ensuring human rights are at the core of decision-making.

The logo for Scotland's Annual Human Rights Conference 2026 is centered within a white rectangular box. It features a pink diamond shape containing the text "Scotland's Annual Human Rights Conference 2026" in a serif font. Below the diamond, the tagline "OUR RIGHTS. YOUR MOVE." is written in a bold, sans-serif font, with "OUR RIGHTS." in pink and "YOUR MOVE." in black.

Scotland's
Annual
Human Rights
Conference
2026
OUR RIGHTS. YOUR MOVE.

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Introduction

Human Rights Consortium Scotland (HRCS) has prepared this briefing to inform prospective parliamentary candidates and everyone directly engaged in – or influencing – the development of political party manifestos.

HRCS believes that human rights are an essential cornerstone to the delivery of a robust, progressive democracy. They are required to deliver a fair and equitable society for everyone. Effectively mainstreaming human rights throughout policy, legislation, budgeting and practice (taking a human rights first approach) would significantly enhance everyone's quality of life.

However, we know that some do not agree, and regression and erosion of human rights is a real and present danger in Scotland. Human rights are increasingly misunderstood and/or used as a political football to highlight the perceived risks to the majority if our society focusses too much on those who are most marginalised and at risk. Or they are too often seen as an 'add on,' a distraction, or even 'too expensive' to meaningfully deliver change.

HRCS, our members and stakeholders are committed to challenging this narrative. We believe that political parties, politicians and public sector leaders have the power to recognise the granular nature of human rights, their day-to-day relevance and their ability to deliver real and lasting positive change for everyone in Scotland.

The Scottish Election in May 2026 could be one of our country's most important in the last 50 years as we are at a critical juncture in the realisation of human rights in Scotland due to a number of factors. This includes the proposed development of a Scottish Human Rights Bill, growing socio-economic inequality, and the need to resist rising populism. HRCS believes both the international and domestic human rights framework have a significant contribution to make in ensuring the development of fair and equitable policies and practice at this critical juncture across the Scottish public, private and voluntary sectors.

Our Priorities and Asks

Human Rights must deliver tangible changes in people's day-to-day lives if they are to be made 'real' for people. However, despite significant rhetoric and ambitious plans and commitments, these tangible changes can feel further away for individuals than ever before. Without a robust, mainstreamed human rights framework to anchor policies at all levels, progressive ambitions and commitments often fall short. This can lead to criticism of human rights themselves, rather than the lack of effective implementation.

Given the increasing sense of disconnect between people and human rights realisation, the priorities and calls for action we highlight in this document focus on opportunities to deliver bold and progressive change. We have outlined a number of calls for action under each priority area. These calls for action are evidenced-based and focus on areas we believe need immediate action and/or further work to ensure that people in Scotland are able to live well and have their human rights respected, protected and fulfilled. Our asks are not ranked in order of importance but are underpinned by a belief in the intersectionality of human experience and human rights realisation.

Civil society organisations believe that the status quo has failed to deliver the transformational change that is required to enable people in Scotland to live free from discrimination and inequality. Change is urgently needed. We stand ready to work with the new Scottish Parliament and Government to build a Scotland that delivers on its reputation as a rights respecting nation and a leader in embedding international human rights standards into law, policy and practice.

HRCS believes that the next Scottish Parliament election presents a critical opportunity to strengthen human rights realisation in Scotland, tackle the inequalities that hold too many people back and deliver sustainable change.

Please read on to see how you can make human rights central to everything you do.

Incorporate International Human Rights Standards into UK and Scottish Legal Landscape

- Introduce a Scottish Human Rights Bill as soon as possible in the new parliamentary term.
- Ensure that the Human Rights Bill reflects people's lived experience by engaging meaningfully with marginalised individuals and communities throughout its development.
- Reform the Scotland Act (specifically Section 28(7)) to restore Holyrood's ability to legislate broadly on human rights and make the devolution settlement and enabler of human rights realisation rather than a barrier.
- Develop, if necessary, other practical solutions to overcome the legal constraints under the Scotland Act 1998, such as phased implementation of human rights legislation or "carve-out" provisions for devolved matters.
- Ensure that any amendments to the Human Rights Act 1998 reinforce the status of international human rights instruments, including ICESCR provisions in Scotland.

Embed Human Rights

- Take action to implement the recommendations from the international human rights monitoring processes Scotland is party to. Within this, prioritise action to address the ICESCR Concluding Observations in order to make economic, social and cultural rights central to the work of the next Scottish Government and Parliament.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive Human Rights Tracker tool for Scotland similar to the approach and tool developed in New Zealand[16]. This must include all international treaties and review processes on an ongoing basis.
- Provide sufficient resources and capacity to ensure the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) ACT 2024.

- Ensure sufficient resources are made available to sustain SNAP2 as independent of Government, supporting it to further development and review the impact and measurement of delivery of the plan's actions.
- Allocate sufficient resources to continue to develop and integrate the Scottish Government's Human Rights and Equalities Mainstreaming Strategy.
- Embed a human rights-first approach and human rights-based budgeting into Scottish Government fiscal processes including taxation to ensure the maximum resources possible to secure economic, social and cultural rights.
- Champion the critical role of civil society and the voluntary sector in promoting human rights mainstreaming in Scotland and in shaping and delivering SNAP2, the mainstreaming strategy and other human rights-focussed policy and implementation work.

Tackle Inequality and Discrimination

- Ensure that robust disaggregated human rights and equality data is systematically gathered and analysed across all spheres of government to enable effective prioritisation and measurement of impact.
- Deliver a capacity building programme focussing on co-production, other methods of participation and human rights across government, the public and private sectors, civil society and the general public to ensure marginalised and excluded people and communities are engaged in developing law, policy and practice.
- Increase the provision of individual and collective advocacy across Scotland to ensure people who are marginalised are better supported to access their human rights and entitlements.
- Develop and implement a human rights capacity building programme for disabled people and people from other marginalised communities.
- Ensure the views of children and young people are respected in all decisions that affect them in line with the right set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC.
- Enhance the powers of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, including greater powers of investigation and the ability to raise legal proceedings, backed by adequate and sustainable resource.

Health Inequalities

- Develop and promote a human rights first approach to all public health promotion and prevention policy developments and planning, including the Population Health Framework, which embeds international human rights standards.
- Establish and deliver a Mental Health and Capacity Law Reform Programme using the recommendations of both the Rome and Scott Reviews and embeds human rights to ensure compliance with Scotland's international human rights duties and obligations including UNCRPD within the lifetime of the next parliament.
- Implement and complete a comprehensive human rights-based reform of social care in Scotland building from the recommendations of the Feeley Review[27] and including key actions on workforce planning and support for unpaid carers.
- Allocate long term, sustainable funding for activity that promotes and supports the good mental health and wellbeing of people living with long term conditions and addresses the mental health inequalities they experience.
- Expedite the creation of a new Scottish Institute for Women's Health to drive the systemic change needed to policy, guidance, and medical training.
- Carry out a robust review of women's pregnancy and maternity services during the COVID-19 pandemic and use the learning from this to co-produce human rights-based services and emergency guidance rooted in intersectional gender analysis and existing standards.
- Increase and improve the provision of gender identity healthcare for trans and non-binary people across Scotland, to ensure it is equitable, easily accessible, timely and high quality, and informed by the needs of service users.
- Continue the human rights first approach of the National Mission on drugs and the Charter of Rights for People Affected by Substance Use.
- Extend the free COVID-19 booster vaccination programme to unpaid carers.
- Create a central Long Covid hub within NHS Scotland to holistically manage specialists and services across Scotland.

The Immediate Reduction of Poverty and Tackling the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Scotland

- Directly tackle poverty for those most in need by undertaking a human rights-based review of Scotland's public debt processes and, working in partnership with local authorities and other stakeholders, reform these processes to ensure full compliance with existing human rights standards including ICESCR.
- Immediately increase the Scottish Child Payment to support those families struggling most with rising costs.
- Work to influence the UK Government to immediately remove the benefit cap and two-child limit, which disproportionately harm women, children, and larger families.
- Simplify the process for accessing devolved benefits to remove barriers for those most in need, ensuring everyone can claim their rights to financial support.
- Cap public transport costs and expand free travel schemes to make mobility affordable for everyone, particularly those on low incomes. This would also address the right to access education, work, and public services.
- Use public procurement and devolved powers to promote the real living wage, eliminate insecure contracts and enforce fair work principles for everyone including disabled people.
- Expand universal free school meals to all primary and secondary pupils, meeting children's right to adequate food and nutrition.
- Increase funding for the Scottish Welfare Fund and other cash-first initiatives to ensure immediate relief for those struggling with the cost of essentials.
- Reform the Council Tax to ensure it is fairer and more progressive, shifting the burden onto higher-value properties and wealthier households. Use this additional revenue to fund further anti-poverty measures and access to social care.
- Protect and increase investment in affordable, accessible social housing to reduce cost pressures on low-income families,
- Ensure housing support and accessibility standards include private tenants.
- Develop a comprehensive national strategy for the right to adequate food.

Disabled People's Rights

- Develop and implement a human rights capacity building programme focussed on disability rights for all spheres of Government and the public sector.
- Develop, resource and implement an Accessible Information Standard for all spheres of government and the public sector.
- Strengthen the accessibility of the social security system in Scotland for disabled people.
- Continue to fund the Social Security Independent Advocacy Service and conduct an evaluation of the Service to ensure it is reaching its maximum potential.
- Ensure that 'Connecting Scotland' and other digital access strategies and approaches, including digital financial inclusion, are fully human rights impact assessed and evaluated with specific regard to the human rights of disabled people and older people and is informed by their engagement.
- Ensure that all government digital systems and process are human rights impact assessed, fully accessible and provide non-digital access to those who require it.
- Re-engage with the significant development work done with regard to a Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodiversity Bill and bring this forward to Parliament early in the next parliamentary term.
- Ensure robust accountability, national scrutiny and joint working to promote and provide access to adequate accessible housing for, people with learning disabilities, mental health problems and/or autistic people enabling those residing in inpatient units or inappropriate out-of-area placements to be discharged and preventing their institutionalisation.
- Pass legislation (the Restraint and Seclusion in Schools (Scotland) Bill or similar) as an opportunity to provide a positive, proactive and statutory approach to the elimination of misuse of restraint and seclusion in schools.

Racism and Racial Discrimination

- Support and effectively resource a Hate Crime Delivery Plan which aims to develop the capacity of those who experience racial hate crime to identify it and know what to do if it happens.
- Design and implement a robust and effective complaints policy for public health and other public services that captures covert and overt racism experiences from both service users and staff.
- Improve national data collection processes and infrastructure to focus on the disaggregation of all data and the intersectionality of people's lives, specifically with regard to race and racial discrimination.
- Develop a measurable, time-limited and resourced national action plan to address racial discrimination in employment including recruitment, retention, zero hours contracts, low pay and insecure working conditions.
- Develop a measurable, time-limited and resourced national action plan to promote and implement effective approaches to tackling racism in education. This should include clear systems for monitoring and evaluating how education establishments record and handle racism and racist incidents, along with mandatory reporting of such incidents across all education establishments.

Migrant Rights

- Work with the Westminster Government to ensure that all refugee and asylum-seeking children and young people have the right to reunite with their families in the UK, expand support for family reunification and provide adequate funding to local authorities for this.
- Increase investment in integration programmes, which address the barriers to accessing housing, physical and mental health services, and further development of community-led initiatives that welcome refugees and asylum seekers.
- Commit to the provision of free public transport for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Collaborate with civil society organisations and all spheres of government to ensure refugee and asylum seekers' voices are central to policy development on a wide range of issues including housing, education and employment.

- Work with the Westminster Government and colleagues to change the 'no recourse to public funds' rule and to enable employment for asylum seekers.
- Demonstrate strong leadership on atrocity crimes and genocide prevention and recognition and support for affected communities.

Access to Justice

- Develop and implement new legislation focussed on structural and funding reforms to the legal aid system in Scotland building on the work already completed by the Scottish Parliament Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee and the Law Society of Scotland.
- Commit to widening the scope of civil legal aid to include preventive legal advice and increasing the financial eligibility thresholds for legal aid to reduce the overall demand for crisis-driven legal interventions.
- Ensure Police Scotland undertake detailed Human Rights Impact Assessments where new criminal justice policies and procedures are being considered.
- Commit to providing adequate funding for criminal justice social work and community justice services and to promote evidence of their effectiveness in addressing offending behaviour.
- Develop and deliver a strategic national plan to reduce court backlogs in order to lower the remand population by ensuring cases are processed more swiftly.
- Reform sentencing guidelines to support more tailored, rehabilitative approaches, and increase investment in preventative services such as diversion programmes.
- Reform the Prisoner Complaints procedures in line with the recommendations of the SHRC's recent report.
- Develop and implement a national human rights-based action plan to address the rights of families and children affected by imprisonment.

Environmental Rights

- Incorporate the right to a healthy environment into Scots law, ensuring accountability for public bodies and polluters.
- Address Scotland's longstanding breach of the Aarhus Convention by fully implementing the recommendations of Decision VII/8s to ensure access to justice is fair, equitable, timely, and not prohibitively expensive.
- Improve environmental quality in deprived areas, increase access to green spaces, and empower marginalised communities in decision-making.
- Establish measurable indicators for environmental quality and inequality, publishing annual progress reports.
- Engage stakeholders, including civil society organisations, trade unions, and local communities, in this work to ensure transparency and accountability.