Third Sector Interface (TSI) Scotland Network Manifesto

Winter 2025

The TSI Scotland Network is a body of expert charities that support, develop and advocate for the third sector and social enterprise and that also make it easier for people to volunteer with a focus on inclusion.

There are 32 Third Sector Interfaces – or TSIs – across Scotland; one in each local authority area. The TSI Scotland Network is supported to carry out its main functions by the Third Sector Unit of Scottish Government with a grant contribution towards core costs for every TSI.

INTRODUCTION

It is said that hope springs eternal, but hope has been in short supply during the turbulence of recent years. And yet, thanks to incredible, unsung work delivered across the country by everyone involved in the Third Sector (and everyone who has volunteered across virtually every sector of the economy), hope has not been abandoned.

Of course, on its own, hope is simply not enough. Ongoing action is required to nourish hope, and tangible progress made in efforts to tackle Scotland's many critical challenges. Because despite those challenges, considerable though they are, numerous opportunities exist for those involved in the Third Sector, social enterprise and volunteering to build a brighter future for the country.

As a country-wide network of 32 Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs), the TSI Scotland Network offers unparalleled insight and expertise grounded in the daily realities of supporting citizens, organisations, enterprises and communities across Scotland. As a collective, we are experts on all aspects of the third sector and social enterprise, and in volunteering, community wealth building, commissioning, procurement and much more.

Indeed, Scotland's TSIs are critical partners for local and national government across virtually every area of public policy and the economy. Together, we already play a critical role supporting communities and individuals, meeting complex challenges head on and keeping hope alive and well. The TSI Scotland Network also offers deep knowledge about where opportunities exist to make significant socio-economic change for the better.

Partnership work remains crucial if those opportunities are to be maximised. As such, and in advance of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election, the TSI Scotland Network asks that all of Scotland's political parties make a firm commitment to decisive action across seven critical areas:

- public service reform
- volunteering for all
- fair funding
- health & social care
- the economy
- climate crisis
- rural impacts

The TSI Scotland Network believes that a combination of political commitment, social innovation and ongoing partnership working between government and the third sector will not only keep hope alive and well in challenging times, but will see a stronger, more inclusive Scotland emerge in the coming months and years.

Public Service Reform

A shift in power

It's no secret that the public sector is under immense strain and has been for many years. But perhaps what is less well understood is that full scale reform of the sector is critical if it is to have any chance of meeting the needs of a rapidly changing society and demographic.

Given that the most disadvantaged groups and individuals in society need and rely on solid public services, and are growing in number, it is vital that an already failing system is reviewed and reconfigured in ways which end ongoing cycles of inequality. Further, a reformed system must be designed to prioritise a reinvigoration of prevention strategies, an approach which both saves money and improves lives. However, for a reformed public service system to be socially successful and economically viable, citizens and communities must be fully involved in the reform process.

Challenges

The TSI Network Scotland is clear that reform is essential if the country is to meet the growing demands placed upon its communities. For us, reform isn't an aspiration, it's critical. As a national Network, the change we want to see requires a realisation that this means public service reform, not public sector reform. However, to achieve that innovative change of approach, a series of challenges must be faced, and can only be overcome when effective, genuine collaborative partnerships are established.

To that end, the TSI Network has identified five principal areas of challenge:

1. Prevention and early intervention services have been consistently undervalued, and indeed in many areas are being cut because of lack of funding.
2. Prevention is further eroded because of a lack of joined-up working. When decisions are taken in parts of the public service system without consultation elsewhere, it can have adverse consequences for individuals and communities, and can actually cost more to deliver expensive interventions.
3. A further challenge comes from lack of partnership working between public sector institutions and the third sector. This view of the third sector as complementary rather than essential is indicative of a tendency to place services rather than citizens and communities at the heart of our systems.
4. Those partnerships are often further stifled by existing power dynamics which inhibit or actively prevent meaningful collaboration and can even duplicate or displace existing third sector work.
5. A final, but significant challenge comes from performance. Because both public and third sector organisations are stretched, there is limited capacity to design and manage change in truly collaborative ways.

Opportunities and Priorities

Despite the challenges, an opportunity exists to better include the third sector in the leadership of the Public Service Reform strategy. This is not about one sector over another, but instead about recognising that new approaches will be more successful when designed between the state, citizens and the third sector. Additionally, a fully engaged third sector offers significant advantages to new ways of working including:

- bringing the voices of those who are least often heard to the table
- tailoring programmes to meet community needs
- the ability to test and scale innovations quickly
- mobilisation of additional resources e.g. volunteers and independent funding

Our ask

Public service reform in Scotland presents a critical opportunity to reshape how we deliver for communities. Scotland's network of TSIs stand ready to play a leadership role - but doing so requires commitment, resources, and a genuine shift in power. Reform must move beyond rhetoric to practical, inclusive, and accountable action, with the third sector recognised not as a supporting player, but as a core pillar of Scotland's public service ecosystem.

To help meet the challenges we have identified, and to maximise the opportunities presented by reform of public services, our ask of Scotland's political parties is that they commit to:

1. Provision of planned, sustainable resources and funding: to support the development of preventative and early intervention approaches
2. Supporting innovative whole-system approaches: to guide service design and delivery, built on truly collaborative partnership working and shared accountability
3. Proper inclusion: promotion and support of the third sector 's role as an essential partner in the public service reform process, at both national and local levels
4. Putting people first: supporting and strengthening the role of communities and citizens in decision-making processes
5. Policy & implementation: meaningful involvement of the third sector in the design, development and delivery of public service reforms
6. Ringfence and extend funding: to support TSIs to strengthen local engagement with service re-design, collaborative commissioning and system leadership
7. Recognition of third sector expertise: include third sector knowledge, leadership, capacity building, access to volunteers and ability to bring citizens to the table

Volunteering for All

Scotland boasts a proud track record when it comes to volunteering, indeed volunteering is central to Scotland's social fabric. Thanks to big hearted citizens using their free time to support individuals and communities, volunteering contributes to social cohesion and helps tackle inequalities. It also plays an important role in early intervention and prevention.

It's not just the TSI Network who recognise the benefits of volunteering, multiple studies have provided evidence which amply demonstrates that volunteering:

- improves health and wellbeing
- improves physical health and resilience
- builds skills, confidence, and employability
- allows people to feel connected and valued

Challenges

Despite the huge and unsung efforts of hundreds of thousands of people, the overall volunteering picture is far from rosy. Following the Covid pandemic, the cost-of-living and mental health crises led to a significant decline in the numbers of people stepping up to volunteer. According to the Scottish Household Survey of 2024, there has been a recovery in numbers of people volunteering but many inequalities in participation have widened.

Financial and budgetary restrictions have resulted in shrinking capacity - too many organisations in the third and public sectors have seen volunteer manager roles being cut, limiting the ability to recruit and support volunteers. Wider economic pressures and funding cuts increase the risk that volunteers are expected to fill gaps in statutory services. Some individuals and groups encounter barriers which can prevent them from enjoying the benefits of volunteering - these include young people, New Scots and those with additional support needs or health issues. At policy level, Scotland already has a strong Volunteering for All policy framework but there is a distinct implementation gap between policy and practice - so much so that the Volunteering Action Plan (VAP)risks becoming irrelevant.

Opportunities and Priorities

Despite these undoubted challenges, Scotland is well-placed to reimagine and reinvigorate volunteering as an essential pillar of a modern, democratic, wellbeing economy.

To help build flourishing volunteer communities across Scotland, the TSI Network has identified seven principal areas of opportunity and priority:

1. **Youth Volunteering**: Ensure every young person has the opportunity to volunteer meaningfully, supported beyond Saltire Award recognition.
2. **Inclusion and Support**: Invest in supported volunteering so those with higher support needs can contribute meaningfully and successfully.
3. **Infrastructure Investment**: Strengthen TSIs as the backbone of local volunteering, resourcing them to develop and support volunteering.
4. **Employability Pathways**: Embed volunteering as a proven, effective route into work and wider participation.
5. **Narrative Shift**: TSIs should lead in telling the story of volunteering's impact, focusing on its value for community cohesion, prevention, and resilience.
6. **Policy Delivery**: Drive forward the Volunteering Action Plan with real investment, accountability and participatory budgeting mechanisms.
7. **New Approaches**: Encourage creative volunteering models across Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs), enterprise, and public services, including impactful employer-supported volunteering.

Our Ask

With the right investment and political leadership, Scotland can realise the vision of the "Volunteering for All" framework, making volunteering truly inclusive and securing its place at the heart of resilient communities. The TSI Scotland Network already provides essential infrastructure and innovation in every local authority area - investing in TSIs is the most effective way to turn policy into practice and strengthen volunteering across Scotland.

As such, the TSI Scotland Network calls on all political parties to bolster volunteering by:

- Championing real, increased investment in volunteering infrastructure through TSIs
- Ensuring the Volunteering Action Plan is properly resourced and implemented
- Supporting initiatives that remove barriers to volunteering for those who are sidelined
- Recognising that volunteering is an essential part of Scotland's social and economic wellbeing - not a substitute for statutory services.
- Scrapping DWP rules that deter volunteering: remove declaration requirements, include volunteering in the new Right to Try Guarantee, and extend Access to Work so 280,000 Scots on health and disability benefits can take part.
- Promoting a strategic environment where volunteering can flourish, helping Scotland tackle depopulation, inequality and declining public trust.

Fair Funding

Securing the future of the third sector

”Funding” is never far from the lips of anyone who works in the third sector. The third sector’s vital contribution to Scottish society continues despite adverse fiscal challenges, but it is persistently undermined by an unstable funding system. Indeed, the fallout from ongoing economic turbulence continues to have a disproportionate impact on the third sector, despite the ever-more critical role the sector plays when it comes to supporting communities.

Funding for the third sector has been problematic for years, with grants and other investment from statutory agencies simply not keeping pace with inflation. Additional financial pressures come from the ongoing cost of living crisis and from unanticipated fiscal measures, particularly the increase in Employers National Insurance contributions.

The ability to commit to long term planning, innovative service design, or even meet core costs continues to be deeply problematic for the third sector as a whole. Inconsistency of inclusion as a partner in collaborative funding design and planning not only undermines the third sector’s critical role, but also represents missed opportunities to develop money-saving preventive approaches.

Challenges

Short-term funding cycles, complex processes and inconsistent local authority practices make long term planning difficult, and can even threaten the very survival of some groups, especially smaller and rural organisations. The trend of providing financial support for project-based funding can make it challenging to cover ongoing core costs, while delays in funding decisions and payments often disrupt services. A lack of consistent, timely and long term funding can result in service closures. In turn, those closures damage communities by disrupting - or even removing - vital and trusted support.

Despite the Scottish Government’s long-running (and welcome) support for the third sector, delays and uncertainty weaken that commitment. Funding often prioritises crisis response over prevention, despite clear evidence that early intervention improves outcomes and reduces pressure on public services. Additionally, there is inconsistency when it comes to involvement of third sector organisations in the shaping of public sector funding programmes.

Opportunities and priorities

It is no secret that the TSI Network Scotland places fair funding as one of its principal asks of the Scottish Government. A solid commitment to fair, stable, long-term funding for both core and project work would allow for strategic planning, staff retention and service sustainability. Transparent, consistent processes with timely decisions and payments would prevent disruption.

Alongside consistency of funding lies another tranche of opportunity, and that comes in the form of strengthened partnership working. The third sector, local authorities, the Scottish Government and funders should work more effectively together on shared priorities, with funding distributed more fairly to grassroots and marginalised groups. As outlined elsewhere in this document, it is abundantly clear that greater investment in prevention and early action would not only deliver lasting benefits but reduce reliance on already creaking statutory services.

To benefit fully from these opportunities, the TSI Network has identified seven priorities for fair funding, as follows:

- **Multi-annual funding**: Introduce a national standard for genuine multi-year funding, built around shared cross-sector principles.
- **Budget alignment**: The late setting of the Scottish Budget prevents timely payment of grants. Until fixed, financial support must be offered to organisations at risk.
- **Core funding & simpler systems**: Dedicated core funding and streamlined grant management would reduce bureaucracy and strengthen resilience.
- **Transitional support**: provide organisations with training, digital tools and expertise to support a smooth transition to multi-year funding models.
- **Third sector champions**: Appoint dedicated champions within Government to help guide organisations through the funding system.
- **Fairness & inclusion**: TSIs should help shape and review programmes locally and nationally. Decisions must be timely, transparent and informed by equality.
- **Legislative consultation**: Introduce early consultation with the sector for legislative changes which have implications for the sector.

Our asks

The TSI Scotland Network urges all of Scotland's political parties to recognise the absolute importance of stable, efficient, fair funding models. Improved methods for investment, aligned with innovative preventive measures and cross-sector collaborative working will not only improve the lives of many individuals and communities, particularly those which are marginalised, but offers an opportunity for funding to be used more effectively in the long term.

To that end, we have three principal asks:

1. Introduce multi-year, stable funding
Move away from short-term, crisis-driven cycles to dedicated core and project funding on a genuinely multi-year basis to support strategic planning, staff retention and service survival

2. Strengthen partnership through a Covenant
Establish a Covenant between the Scottish Government and the third sector to ensure fair, transparent processes, timely decisions, and meaningful involvement in service design

3. Invest directly in local communities
Improve fairness, visibility and coordination of funding, shift investment to prevention, and ensure evaluation focuses on community outcomes, not excessive reporting.

Health and Social Care

A preventative approach

Home from Hospital delays, waiting lists, staff recruitment crises, patients on stretchers in corridors, abuse in care homes and entire systems on the verge of collapse - there is simply no escaping the sheer scale of the challenges facing Scotland's health and social care (H&SC) sector. These are challenges which vary across the country according to geography and local demographics, and which continue to worsen as our population ages and increasingly lives with long term ill health.

Despite the pervading gloom, it's essential for the social foundations of a wellbeing economy that intensive and genuinely collaborative efforts are made to protect, revitalise and think big about the future of health and social care. If the current multi-layered, cross-sector H&SC model is to continue, the critical role played by the third sector in H&SC simply cannot be marginalised.

As it is, the third sector already delivers essential and often unsung services which support the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities across the whole country. For many, these are lifeline services, offering access to fundamentals like food, physical fitness and social connection, but the full range of third sector programmes, activities and projects supporting health and wellbeing is nothing short of remarkable. However, the sector is under huge strain as resources are stretched to breaking point and demand on funding continues to grow exponentially.

As a support system, the TSI Scotland Network is witness to the epic community commitment made to H&SC from third sector organisations operating across the length and breadth of the country. The heroic, and often hidden, efforts of community champions play a vital part in delivery of prevention and early intervention services - without that effort, that safety net, Scotland's collective wellbeing would be at risk of terminal decline.

Inaction is simply not an option if H&SC is to evolve and improve. Failure to properly fund and engage with the third sector will result in yet more demand for crisis services; deeper health inequalities and social inclusion; dwindling community capacity and volunteering; missed opportunities for innovation, early intervention and improved local economic resilience.

Case Study 1: Inverclyde Cares

Inverclyde TSI co-produced a peer-led wellbeing programme with local mental health charities, reducing GP visits by 23% in 12 months and reconnecting 80 individuals to local volunteering, training, and social groups.

Challenges

As it is, the TSI Network has identified numerous challenges standing in the way of progress, despite the existence of national and local policy directives focused on early intervention and prevention.

The dominance of crisis response services mean that proactive investment in prevention and early intervention always suffers. A deep divide exists when it comes to medical v social models - the divergence in ethos, language and approaches leads to misalignment when it comes to strategic planning and delivery. The ever-increasing complexity and demand for H&SC services often results in early intervention being overlooked. Lack of transparency on budgeting and spend prevents proper scrutiny of H&SC spend in community settings. The trend for in-house commissioning by many HSCPs both reduces opportunities for the third sector and limits innovation in service delivery. The third sector is subject to unrealistic expectations that it can seamlessly pick up service gaps, despite limited resources and short-term funding, and claims that in-house delivery is cheaper are not fully substantiated thanks to undeclared costs in public sector delivery. A final and significant challenge comes via imbalanced power dynamics. Strategic decisions are often made without sufficient engagement with the third sector, and this lack of parity undermines trust, partnership and sustainability of early intervention and primary prevention approaches. This often results in increased scrutiny of the sector and an assumption that public sector is best.

Case Study 2: East Lothian Community First

Through early intervention and community-led planning, Community First supported over 400 residents with wraparound support in one year, reducing delayed hospital discharges and strengthening local volunteering networks.

Prevention and early intervention

The TSI Scotland Network is clear that there are ways to tackle a failing H&SC system, and numerous long term benefits to be gained from developing and implementing preventative approaches in our communities. Scotland can no longer afford to delay prevention. With the right policy framework, resources and respect for local context, we can get it right for people and places across Scotland.

As illustrated in the three third sector case studies in this feature, early intervention and prevention approaches can and do make a positive, lasting, measurable impact in local communities. Not only does that reduce demand on H&SC services, it offers opportunities to improve health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, tackles social isolation and saves money.

To that end, and ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election, the network is seeking a genuine policy commitment to support effective and equitable cross-sector collaborative working. That commitment, combined with collaborative, innovative service design is not mere window dressing, but is essential if a crisis-driven, failing H&SC system is to return to good health.

With the implementation of the Care Act (Scotland) 2025, renewed focus on the National Care Service, and public service reform commitments, Scotland has a generational opportunity to shift how we deliver H&SC services. But for cross-sector working to be truly effective, there is a need for genuine parity, trust, transparency, accountability, collective leadership and shared learning. The third sector must be involved in all stages of commissioning, planning and innovation; data, insights and governance must be shared and Fair Funding principles applied. Investment in services must happen upstream to support early intervention and avoid crisis-driven reactive responses. As for prevention and early intervention, these simply must be informed by direct experience, co-design and geography - there can be no one-size fits all approach for a country whose communities are as diverse as Scotland's.

Case Study 3: Angus Volunteer Link-Up
A TSI-led programme linked isolated individuals with local walking and befriending groups, reducing loneliness and increasing service uptake without additional clinical interventions.

The Economy

Transforming our economic approach

Scotland's economy is at a pivotal moment. Despite strong policy direction through the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) and the burgeoning Wellbeing Economy movement, Scotland's social economy - including social enterprises, cooperatives and other inclusive democratic business models (IDBMs) - remains undervalued and under-embedded in mainstream economic planning.

The third sector plays a critical role in community resilience, employability, local wealth building and the Just Transition agenda, and yet it continues to operate without sufficient recognition, funding or policy levers to be able to deliver impact at even greater levels.

At a time when local economies are struggling with the ongoing cost of living crisis, demographic pressures, underfunding and the turbulence caused by global market volatility, The TSI Network argues that Scotland simply must harness the full potential of its social economy to deliver truly inclusive, place-based prosperity for all of its diverse communities.

Challenges

There is no question that the ongoing uncertainty caused by tumultuous domestic and global economic fluctuations has presented significant challenges for all sectors. However, the impact of that turbulence is felt particularly keenly by individuals and communities, but also by the local organisations who support them.

The TSI Network has unparalleled access to third sector organisations operating throughout Scotland, and has identified the particular economic challenges being faced. These include:

It is extremely difficult for organisations to operate effectively in turbulent economic times, with little or no investment from the private sector. There is a persistent undervaluing of the third sector's role supporting communities decimated by austerity and the cost of living crisis, and a failure to recognise the huge social and economic value offered by unpaid carers and volunteers. There is a lack of third sector inclusion in economic planning, policy development and delivery. Some policies, although well-intentioned e.g. Community Wealth Building, lack teeth and are not being properly implemented. Currently, dedicated funding for democratic business models is missing and support provided by Local Enterprise Partnerships for alternative social enterprise models is patchy, or even not fit for purpose.

Opportunities and priorities

The TSI Network is clear - there are numerous opportunities to be gained from political support for a social economy in which social enterprise, co-operatives and other inclusive democratic business models can thrive and add value to the communities they operate in. Further, there is a massive opportunity for Community Wealth Building policies to be strengthened as a mechanism to deliver fairer, more resilient and inclusive local economies.

In order to maximise those opportunities, the Network has identified a series of priorities:

Inclusive economic strategy

- Embed inclusive democratic business models at the heart of all economic strategies, and apply targets and metrics to measure growth, contribution to GDP and social value.
- Guarantee the inclusion of social economy representatives in local and national decision-making processes.
- Ensure that inclusive democratic business models are integrated into all aspects of economic transformation strategy.

Financing the democratic economy

- Earmark funding to support inclusive democratic business models and innovation.
- Establish a Social And Democratic Capital Fund to blend philanthropic, public, and community investment.
- Develop neighbourhood wealth funds and community share models.
- Integrate social impact measurement metrics into national reporting.

Community Wealth Building

- An immediate priority is to strengthen the existing Community Wealth Building Bill. That should include improved access to procurement opportunities, clearer asset transfer procedures and a commitment to long term partnership working between the third, public and private sectors.
- Inclusive democratic business models must be included in local Community Wealth Building plans and supply chains, and reporting mechanisms developed to accurately measure impact and outcomes.

Our asks

For a shift in policy towards social economy models to be successful, for it to deliver on its full potential as a transformative approach for Scotland's diverse communities, the TSI Network asks that the Scottish Government should:

1. Reappoint a Minister for Community Wealth Building to champion IDBMs and coordinate cross-portfolio delivery.
2. Establish transparent monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure social and economic value created by IDBMs.
3. Align procurement policy with community and social enterprise outcomes favouring local, third sector providers.
4. Review and strengthen CWB legislation within two years of enactment.
5. Link IDBM growth explicitly to Just Transition, Fair Work, and Circular Economy policies.

Climate Emergency

Supporting climate conscious communities

The driest summer in decades, followed by early, and especially wild autumn storms - Scotland too is feeling the effects of the global climate crisis. Ignoring climate change is simply not an option, and the third sector plays a pivotal role to support community-led climate action and learning.

Indeed, the third sector is already playing a vital role across Scotland, delivering climate change action. From local community energy projects to national advocacy, third sector organisations are leading on both mitigation and adaptation, reaching communities the private and public sectors struggle to serve.

Many positive steps have already been taken as Scotland works towards its ambitious Net Zero and Just Transition goals. These steps include the introduction of 24 Community Climate Action Hubs across the country which have developed a strong, grassroots foundation of local community action. However, the severity of the climate crisis continues to worse, and to achieve a truly equal and just transition for all communities across the country, the TSI Scotland Network seeks an even greater commitment from government.

Challenges

With its nationwide overview, the TSI Network is perfectly placed to identify areas of challenge for the third sector in Scotland when it comes to tackling climate issues, and three significant challenges have emerged.

There is little dispute about the scale of the global climate crisis, but the third sector in Scotland is stymied by a lack of strategic direction. The set up of national and local infrastructure around climate action has actually prevented a co-ordinated and consistent approach. This lack of consistency presents a disparate, postcode lottery of approach across the country. The sheer scale of the global climate emergency can sometimes feel overwhelming and can be difficult for organisations, groups and individuals to get their heads around. Shifting political priorities and policy uncertainty have an adverse impact on the third sector's ability to plan and deliver on climate action targets. That uncertainty can also delay or dilute the impact of community-led initiatives.

Opportunities and priorities

A range of opportunities exist which would allow for the third sector to support community-led climate action initiatives to an even greater extent, and for the sector as a whole to contribute to Scotland's climate change targets. There is potential for the sector to offer a co-ordinated approach to information sharing, training and events. In turn, that would encourage local action, actions which when co-ordinated across the country could be linked together to present a national approach. However, to fully unlock this potential, investment in capacity, funding stability and strategic partnership is essential.

The TSI Network believes that the third sector can scale its contribution to climate action, but to do that will require a series of support measures. Practical measures include:

- Sustainable, long term funding
- Capacity building and organisational support
- Policy co-design and strategic alignment
- Access to scalable funding mechanisms
- Support for adaptation and community resilience

Our asks

Scotland's Just Transition process relies on local groups leading change. Without sustained investment, grassroots capacity - especially in rural and island areas - is undermined. In order to build on the third sector's important contribution to grassroots climate action, the Network has a series of policy and strategic development asks of each of Scotland's political parties.

As such, our four principal asks are that Government commits to:

1. Establishment of a dedicated third sector climate fund
Multi-year, core, seed and project funding to scale up third sector contributions to climate action.

2. Embedding of the third sector and community groups in policy development
Co-create climate policy with voluntary sector representation at local, regional, and national levels; community insight on resilience and adaptation must be embedded in climate governance and in the Just Transition process.

3. Strengthening regional support via Climate Action Hubs and TSIs
Ensure equitable geographic coverage and resourcing for local infrastructure bodies.

4. Improvement of knowledge exchange and data sharing
Develop a national evidence base of community-led climate impacts, best practice, and learning.

Rural

Community, co-design and collaboration

Scotland boasts spectacular landscapes and diverse countryside communities, stretching from the rolling hills of Dumfries and Galloway to the jagged peaks and deep lochs of the Highlands and the white sand beaches of our islands. However, within our stunning countryside lies a multi-layered series of issues which, when compounded, threaten the very wellbeing of our rural communities.

Supporting and protecting those communities is vital for Scotland's economic health, indeed the country's future resilience depends on it. As such, it is incumbent on all of Scotland's political parties to recognise that thriving rural communities are not peripheral but central to Scotland's success.

Challenges

Whilst some of the challenges faced by rural communities are shared with urban communities too, the compound effect has a particularly detrimental effect in rural settings, resulting in considerable inequality.

Depopulation, problems with workforce retention and an ageing demographic create localised socio-economic imbalances. A lack of employment opportunities combined with an ever-increasing demand for care services creates further imbalance in rural areas. Fragile local economies are adversely affected by ongoing fiscal turbulence, whilst poor digital and physical infrastructure plus limited public transport creates further inequalities for those living in rural areas. Limited access to affordable housing and services for both local people and key workers, simply serves to compound those inequalities. Hidden and persistent poverty are significant problems in rural Scotland: issues which are further exacerbated by economic models which see exploitation of both resources and labour.

Opportunities and priorities

The TSI Scotland Network has members in every local authority area in Scotland, including those which have largely rural geographies. As a result the Network is ideally placed to provide deep insight to the challenges being faced by rural communities and to the third sector organisations offering vital support services in those communities. This knowledge also informs identification of the many opportunities which exist to tackle and repair those challenges.

Those opportunities include:

- Development of innovative housing polices: support for affordable housing initiatives to support repopulation and recruitment.

- Design of repopulation strategies: tackle drain of young people and families away from rural areas by providing opportunities for them and people of all ages.
- Introduction of innovative funding models: provide access to funding streams which recognise higher costs of rural service delivery; embed a rural premium.
- Building of more resilient communities: increase social care and third sector capacity to support aging population by offering improved access to fair pay and housing.
- Increased priority on localised economic models: apply Community Wealth Building principles to tackle low wage and seasonal economies and depopulation; retain local wealth and talent and attract more families to rural areas
- Close transport and infrastructure gaps: design and implement a rural connectivity strategy to improve transport and digital inclusion.
- Provide fair and targeted funding models: address and tackle hidden and persistent rural deprivation and poverty; develop specific rural poverty measurement models other than those used in SIMD evaluation.
- Support third service delivery: co-design and deliver properly funded innovative approaches to build capacity, boost skills development, encourage volunteering and tackle workforce gaps.

Our asks

As the Scottish Parliament election approaches, the TSI Network makes a series of specific asks from all political parties to help address the specific issues facing the country's rural communities. To achieve positive change, rural policy reform must move from rhetoric to practical, place-based action; embracing a shift in power dynamics towards collective, collaborative design and delivery. Indeed, our collective experience in grant management, partnership working and mobilising volunteers makes us a natural partner in rural policy delivery.

TSIs stand ready to support the design and delivery of policies that address depopulation, poverty and infrastructure gaps, while building stronger, fairer local economies. To that end, our elections asks include:

1. Recognition of rurality as an embedded theme across all national strategies
2. Inclusion of whole-system approaches to rural services, ensuring health, housing, transport and economic policy are aligned, meaningful and supported by resources.
3. Ensure greater community benefit from major developments and renewable energy projects are made available based on evidence of need not just geographical proximity to a development.
4. Design and implementation of a rural connectivity strategy, spanning transport, digital access and workforce development.
5. Active participation of TSIs and rural communities in national policy design, review and implementation, including the forthcoming Rural Delivery Plan.

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