



# OUR MANIFESTO

Autumn 2025

PLANNING  
DEMOCRACY

**We call for a radical overhaul  
of Scotland's planning system  
and a shift from private profit  
to public good, putting people,  
nature, and climate first.**



**This manifesto calls for a radical overhaul of Scotland’s planning system – which currently fuels inequality, environmental harm, and public exclusion.**

Developed by affected communities, it demands a shift from private profit to public good – putting people, nature, and climate first. Key reforms include stronger community power, rights-based planning, environmental protections, affordable housing and alignment with land reform.

“This Manifesto is just what the people of Scotland are crying out for. We applaud everyone who brought this document together. We are totally overwhelmed by its accuracy, truthfulness, openness and transparency. It absolutely reflects the views of local people and communities in every way. Every planning failure highlighted in this manifesto is happening right now (in Nairn and in the Highlands). This Manifesto needs to get promoted everywhere!”

**Nairn Community Council**

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# What is this manifesto?

**Despite its importance, Scotland's planning system is failing the people and places it should serve.** Planning decisions have long term impacts and decisions made today are locking us into a disastrously unsustainable and unjust future. Scotland has the opportunity to become a leader in democratic and sustainable planning. We have strong traditions of community organising, environmental protection, and social justice that provide foundations for transformational change.

This manifesto provides a roadmap for creating a planning system that serves Scotland's people and places. It calls on politicians, planning professionals and all those with power over planning decisions to embrace the changes necessary to create a planning system that serves Scotland's people and places.

**Real change will only come if the manifesto is delivered in full. Picking off single actions in isolation isn't enough, the manifesto needs to be embraced in its entirety.**

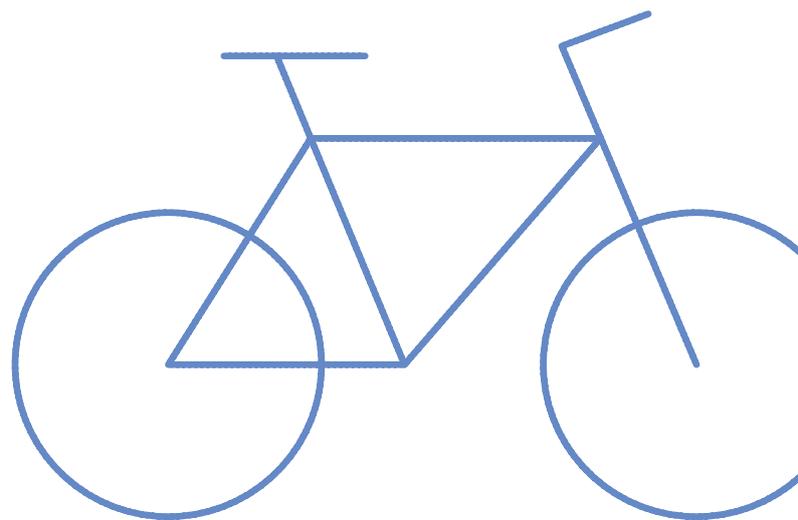
Our proposals emerge from years of community-led research, advocacy and organising work that has brought together diverse voices from across Scotland to identify shared challenges and develop collective solutions.

**To create this manifesto, we have:**

- conducted surveys to understand community experiences of planning
- carried out case study research into specific planning decisions
- worked with academic partners to assess planning policy and practice
- held workshops and in-depth conversations exploring planning challenges and potential solutions.

**While there are many important aspects of planning reform that need to be addressed, we have focused our manifesto on the themes that communities consistently tell us are most urgent:**

- having genuine power over local development decisions
- protecting the natural environments that sustain life and wellbeing
- ensuring fair access to housing and services regardless of economic circumstances
- holding decision-makers accountable for their choices.





# **The choice is clear.**

**Scotland can continue with a planning system that deepens inequality and environmental destruction, or we can build something better.**



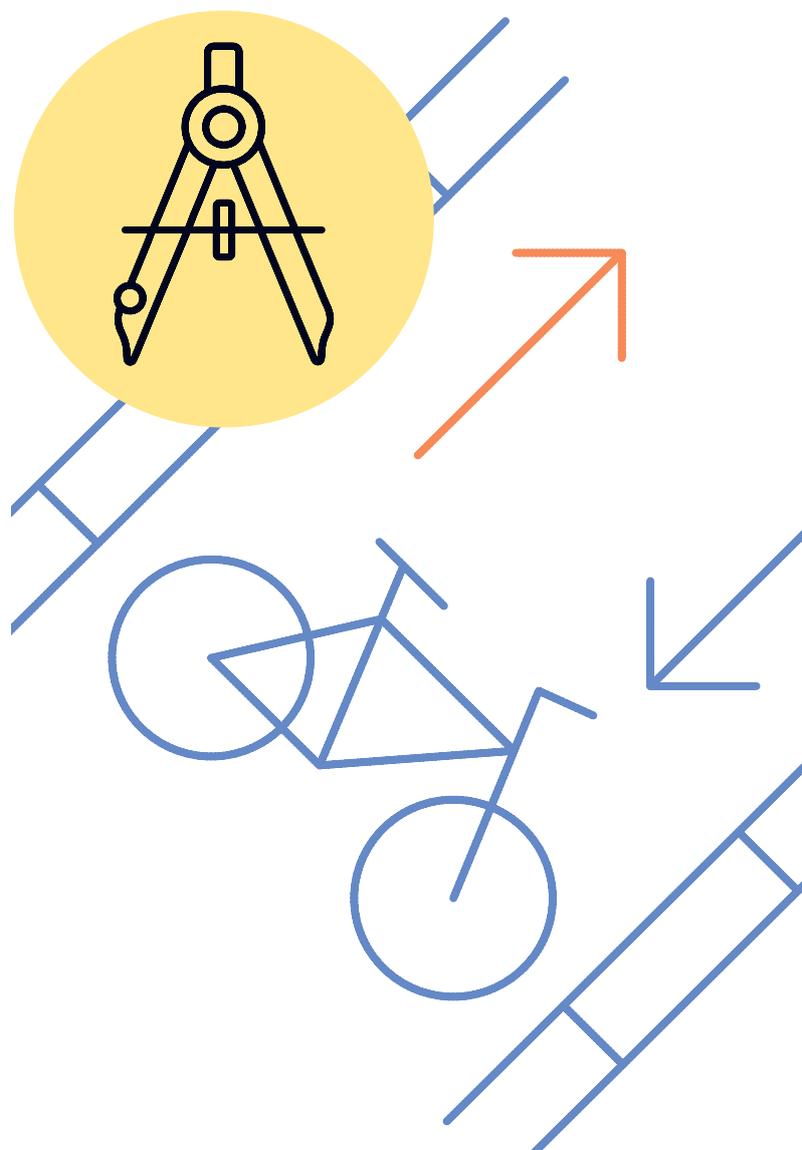
# What is planning?

Planning is the system that decides how Scotland's land is used and developed. It determines what is built where. It decides where factories, windfarms, houses and green spaces go. It affects a lot of our daily lives from how we travel to protecting natural places. **Planning shapes the places where we live, work and spend time with family and friends.**

Every day, planning decisions affect our lives in fundamental ways. They influence whether young people can afford to stay in the communities where they grew up, whether people have access to good housing near schools and healthcare, whether we can walk or cycle safely and whether our local environments are protected or destroyed.

In Scotland we have what is called a 'plan led' system. The Scottish Government sets national policy through the National Planning Framework (NPF) while local councils create Local Development Plans (LDP) that set out where different types of development should happen in their areas. These are required to involve the public at every stage. When developers want to build something, they submit applications asking for planning permission. The National Planning Framework and Local Development Plan guide whether or not they get permission, but a range of other issues can also be taken into account when decisions are made. If developers are refused planning permission, they can appeal the decision. The public have no right to appeal a planning decision, even if it directly affects them.

Communities can contribute in various ways, including by inputting into LDPs and commenting on planning applications. They can also prepare Local Place Plans which express local priorities and needs. These may also be taken into account in planning decisions, but carry less weight than national and local plans.



# Why is change needed now?

**In theory the planning system should ensure democratic control over development, allowing for collective decisions about the kinds of change we think are in the long-term public interest. In practice, that is far from the case. Our planning system has few positive powers to ensure the right development happens in the right places, or to intervene in how sites are owned and managed in the long-term. Instead, it has become an almost entirely regulatory system.**

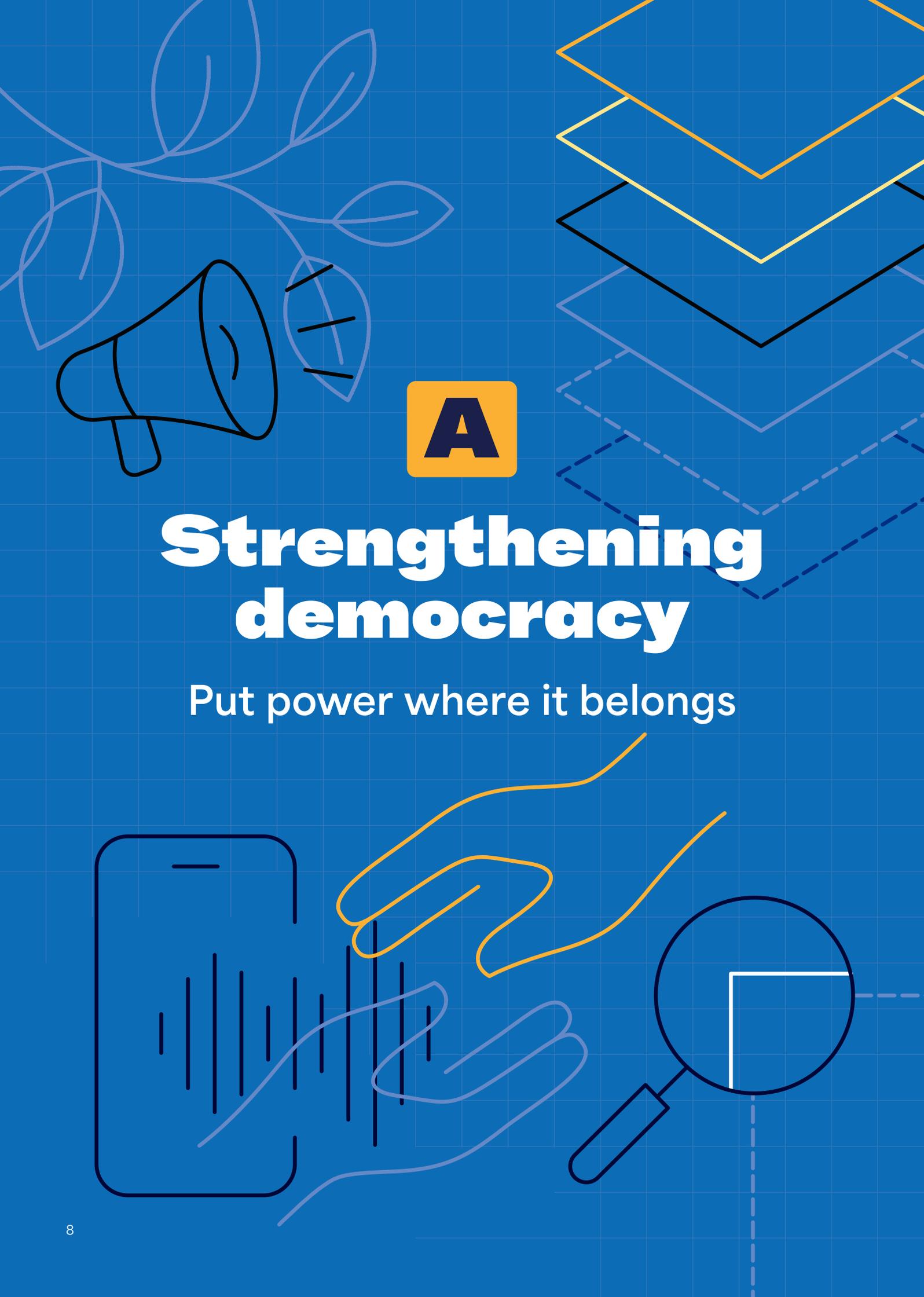
Influenced by powerful corporate lobbies, government has often viewed development as a means of stimulating economic growth rather than addressing community wellbeing and sustainability. For a long time, the default answer to development proposals has tended to be yes. Too often viewed in negative terms as a constraint on development, planning has been starved of resources.

This model of growth-dependent, development-led planning puts property before people and the planet, reduces the scope for meaningful democratic control and too often results in poor-quality, socially and environmentally harmful outcomes. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Scotland stands at a crossroads. The decisions we make about planning in the coming years will be a determining factor in whether future generations inherit thriving, sustainable communities or face deepening inequality and environmental crisis. The climate emergency and housing crisis demand nothing less than fundamental reform of how we make decisions about land use and development.

The Scottish Government introduced National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) in 2023 with enhanced policies on climate change, biodiversity and community wealth building. However, early evidence suggests that despite progressive policy language, practice on the ground remains largely unchanged. As Scotland approaches the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections, there is an opportunity to build on NPF4's intentions with more fundamental reforms.

Planning cannot be separated from broader questions of land ownership, economic structures and democratic participation. In this manifesto we show how our planning system could be reimagined as a powerful mechanism for realising broader aspirations for land reform, community wealth, wellbeing and democratic participation.



**A**

# Strengthening democracy

Put power where it belongs

## THE CHALLENGE

# A democratic deficit in planning

**Across Scotland, communities are feeling increasingly powerless as planning decisions reshape their neighbourhoods without meaningful involvement or regard for existing communities.** From large-scale housing developments that strain local infrastructure to industrial projects that harm the environment, people are being sidelined from decisions that directly affect their lives. A survey of 228 community councillors by Planning Democracy confirms what many already know: communities feel they have very little influence over planning processes.

While developers and businesses benefit from access, resources and established relationships with officials, local residents are expected to navigate a complex, under-resourced system with minimal support. Without real reform, planning in Scotland will continue to serve the interests of the powerful, while ordinary people are left on the margins.

The 2019 Planning Act promised to give a voice to communities to influence the future development of their local area through Local Place Plans, allowing them to focus on their needs and aspirations at an early stage of the planning process. However, while Local Place Plans offer an opportunity for community input, they carry little weight in the planning system and require a lot of voluntary effort. In contrast, the more powerful Local Development Plans - which have a statutory basis - remain largely inaccessible to meaningful public influence.

An added factor is that over the last century, local government in Scotland has steadily evolved into ever larger units of municipal administration. Most significantly, in 1975 all of Scotland's Town

Councils, County and District Councils and Royal Burghs were reorganised into a two tier system of Regional and District Councils. Twenty years later, a further reorganisation led to the current system of 32 single-tier authorities - a development which has left Scotland with the most centralised system of local government of any developed country in the world.

This has significantly weakened local democracy, eroded public trust and contributed to declining voter turnout. Although devolution was intended to bring power closer to the people, most control remains concentrated at Holyrood. Councils now find themselves too large to be truly local, yet too small to operate strategically.

### **Power is unequally distributed**

Developers and landowners are treated as partners in the planning process, engaging in pre-application discussions while communities must fight for recognition. This imbalance leaves communities at a serious disadvantage.

### **Representatives that can't represent**

There is a disconnect between the role of elected representatives and mechanisms for public participation in planning. Communities frequently complain about how hard it is to engage with their local councillors on planning issues. That is because councillors are warned any contact could lead to legal challenges against their decisions. This is an affront to democracy and demonstrates how the system is running scared of powerful developers.

### **Engagement is still superficial**

More than 50 years after the Skeffington Report called for meaningful public participation, the system rarely moves beyond informing or consulting. Communities are not truly involved and certainly not empowered to shape decisions.

### **Lack of resources and support for communities**

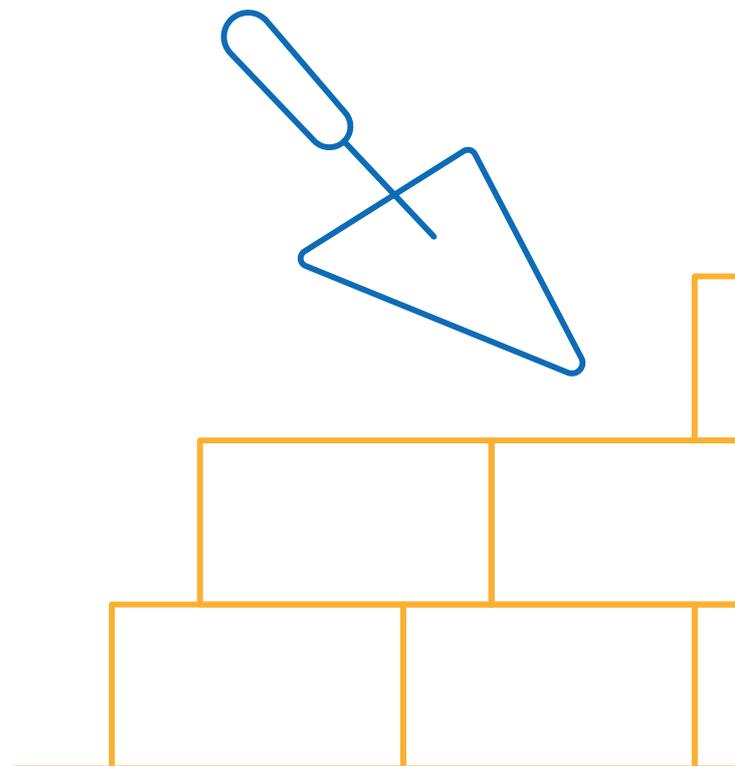
Planning authorities often lack the capacity or political will to work collaboratively. Meanwhile, Community Councils rely on volunteers with no training, limited time and no access to expert advice - despite their statutory role.

### **Technical barriers exclude many**

The planning system demands specialist knowledge, digital tools and time commitments that many simply don't have. This creates a system that works for professionals - but locks ordinary people out.

### **Community voices are marginalised and discredited**

Legitimate concerns are often dismissed as 'NIMBYism', discrediting public input and discouraging others from speaking up. There are few routes for people to genuinely shape plans or decisions.



## CALLS TO ACTION



**A1**

### **The public must play a key role in shaping future National Planning Frameworks, policies and critical infrastructure decisions like transport, energy and schools**

In other European countries, nationally significant infrastructure projects are subject to significant and well-resourced public deliberation exercises (e.g. citizens assemblies). This involves the public in shaping decisions that require a principles-led approach and interrogation of trade-offs.

These processes also build public understanding and community resilience on planning matters. Making such an approach central to the selection of national developments would be a foundational statement of commitment to the principles of democratic planning in Scotland.



**A2**

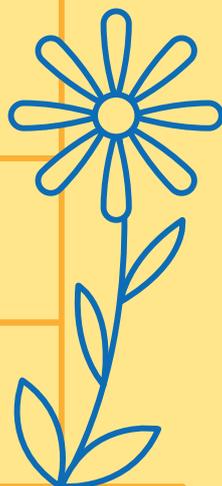
### **A truly plan-led system with meaningful community power**

Unlike planning systems in many other countries, plans in Scotland are not binding. This is because decisions on planning applications can take into account a wide range of other 'material considerations'. We need a genuinely plan-led planning system, where decisions are guided primarily by democratically produced Local Development Plans (LDP) - not made ad hoc in response to developer pressure.

A truly democratic planning system means giving communities a central role in shaping plans, working alongside planning authorities. Communities must be treated as primary stakeholders - not just consultees. They should have real influence and shared decision-making power in shaping the LDP and determining what kind of development happens in their areas.

### **Establish community liaison panels to guide plan preparation**

Establishing community liaison panels to guide plan preparation is a practical way to embed local voices and lived experience into planning decisions - especially at the early stages when plans are being shaped. Community liaison panels can share their views by taking part in workshops, reviewing draft plans, and co-designing consultations. They offer local knowledge through site visits, place audits, and direct discussions with planners and elected officials.



Panels can also make formal recommendations and participate in public events, ensuring their input shapes the plan from start to finish.

### **Make LPPs part of the statutory development plan**

To make Local Place Plans (LPPs) part of the statutory development plan, legislation must be updated so that adopted LPPs carry legal weight alongside Local Development Plans and the National Planning Framework. This would require clear standards for approval, a formal adoption process through local authorities and dedicated support for communities. It would give local people real power to shape development in their area and ensure community priorities directly influence planning decisions.



### **Limit developer appeal rights only to applications in line with development plans**

Currently developers have the right to appeal against any refusal of planning permission, even when what is proposed goes against agreed LDPs and LPPs. Restricting this right to applications that are in line with adopted plans would be a powerful way of reinforcing a genuinely plan-led system.

By doing so it will:

- Strengthen public trust in the integrity of the planning process
- Ensure consistency and fairness in decision-making
- Help deliver development in areas and forms that have been publicly consulted on and approved
- Deter developers from proposing speculative applications on unallocated land, strengthening the plan-led system.

This rebalances power in the planning system, affirming that community-backed plans - not developer pressure - guide Scotland's future development.





## **Build capacity for meaningful community participation in planning**

To enable genuine and effective community involvement in the planning system, we call for a comprehensive approach that strengthens capacity, improves timelines, and fosters long-term planning literacy:

- Adequately resource Community Councils and local community organisations and provide dedicated planning liaison officers to offer guidance, technical support and capacity building. In areas where levels of public participation in planning are low, increase resources and support for community development work. This levels the playing field between communities and professional developers and could be partly funded by ring fencing a small % of planning gain agreements to fund participation and engagement activities.
- Ensure statutory consultation timelines allow sufficient time for communities to organise, consult and provide informed, collective responses. Current timeframes are often too short, undermining meaningful engagement and forcing rushed feedback on complex proposals.
- Clarify rules and practices around ‘pre-determination’ to ensure that elected representatives are able to listen to and represent constituents’ views on planning matters.
- Integrate planning and place-based education into the school curriculum and offer accessible, lifelong public education on planning. Early

education should build knowledge of how planning works, the history of places and critical thinking around sustainability, land use and equity - equipping future generations to shape their communities.

Together, these measures ensure communities are not just consulted, but empowered - with the knowledge, time, and support they need to participate meaningfully in shaping the future of their places.



## **Empower local communities through democratic municipalism**

With reference to the ongoing review of local governance - Democracy Matters - we call for the Scottish Government to introduce a system of democratic municipalism, bringing the state closer to communities, through a more localised system of Government. We want local authorities to be less remote and distant from communities relying less on community voluntarism and instead working more closely with citizens to give them an active role in shaping their towns, cities and neighbourhoods. In recognition that such a transformation of Scotland’s local governance is a long term ambition, in the first instance and as a first step, we call upon the Scottish Government to incorporate the European Charter of Local Self-Government into Scots Law.



**B**

# Protecting nature

Ending ecocide through  
planning reform

## THE CHALLENGE

# Climate breakdown and ecological collapse

Scotland faces a twin crisis of climate breakdown and ecological collapse. Despite being one of the first nations to declare a climate emergency and committing to protect 30% of land and sea by 2030, planning decisions continue to approve developments that increase emissions and destroy biodiversity.

### A nature crisis in plain sight

Scotland is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Wildlife populations and habitats are in decline, yet there is no system for measuring the cumulative impact of development on biodiversity. Despite high level targets and the National Biodiversity Strategy, they are undermined by weak implementation, vague guidance and discretionary planning decisions that routinely trade nature for short-term economic gains.

### Carbon budgets and green house gas (GHG) emissions are not being considered

Scotland has committed to reaching net-zero by 2045 and NPF4 has made climate action central to the planning system. As yet, however, there is no clear plan in place for realising these goals. Development activity generates significant environmental impacts, but Local Development Plans are not assessing the carbon and GHG emissions that proposed development will generate. And we have no way of tracking the cumulative impact of individual planning decisions. Taking the climate emergency seriously means we need to start planning within agreed emissions budgets.

### The illusion of environmental protection

The planning system gives the appearance of protecting biodiversity, but in practice relies on siloed professional judgments, unenforceable conditions and superficial box-ticking. Biodiversity enhancements are often relegated to planning conditions with no realistic monitoring or enforcement, while destructive projects are waved through under the promise of weak future mitigations.

Even the mitigation hierarchy - designed to avoid, then minimise and (only as a last resort) compensate for environmental harm - is often ignored. Instead of requiring on-site protection and enhancement, Scotland risks adopting a biodiversity offsetting model that treats nature as a tradable commodity, repeating mistakes already evident elsewhere in the UK.

## **A system biased against nature**

The planning system is still dominated by economic priorities. The National Strategy for Economic Transformation subordinates environmental concerns beneath growth objectives, locking us into an unsustainable trajectory. Developments are routinely approved based on perceived economic benefits, regardless of their impact on ecosystems or carbon budgets. Shockingly, emissions from housing alone could exhaust the UK's entire 2050 carbon budget.

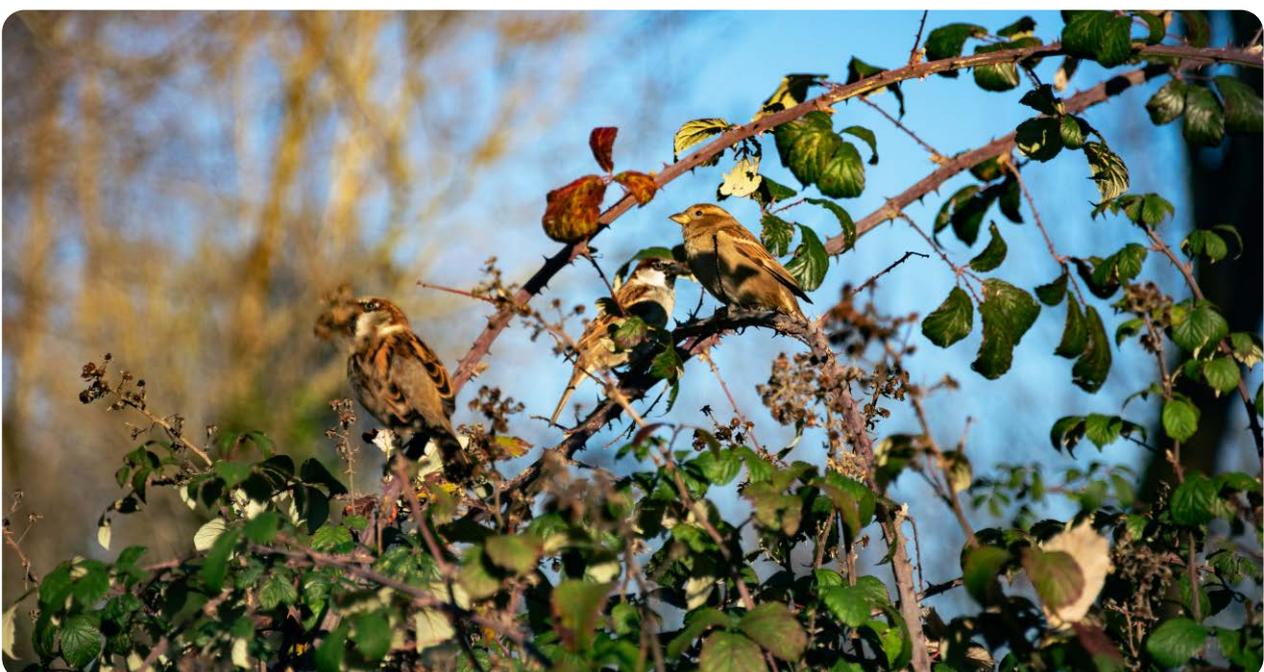
Our cash strapped local authorities are heavily reliant on developers contributing to our infrastructure needs (such as building schools, GP surgeries, play areas and even nature projects) through planning gain. This means that our social and environmental needs have become dependent on private sector development, especially on higher-value private sector development. This incentivises local authorities to encourage development and makes planning growth-dependent, which is environmentally harmful overall.

## **Communities lack power to defend local environments**

Despite obligations under the Aarhus Convention, communities have little power to stop environmentally damaging developments or ensure that conditions are upheld. They are often the only line of defence for local habitats, yet they face systemic barriers to participation and accountability.

## **Reconnecting with nature**

A deep disconnect from the natural world reinforces poor decisions. Without widespread understanding of nature's value and function, policies fail to reflect ecological realities. Scotland must invest in public education, nature literacy and community involvement to rebuild this vital relationship.



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## CALLS TO ACTION

To address the climate and biodiversity emergencies, Scotland's planning system must shift from enabling environmental harm to actively protecting and restoring nature. These calls to action outline urgent reforms to ensure that all planning decisions support ecological recovery and a climate-resilient future.



### **Limit and refocus development**

Getting serious about tackling the climate and nature emergencies means reducing the amount of land and other natural resources that development consumes and the emissions it generates. It is not always possible to mitigate harm and decision-makers need to be empowered to refuse development proposals that damage biodiversity or exacerbate climate change.

- **Enforce ecological and climate limits.** Development should only proceed where it demonstrably enhances nature and aligns with Scotland's climate commitments.
- **Stronger local development plans (LDPs).** LDPs must clearly define what development is strictly necessary and include enforceable limits to prevent cumulative environmental damage.



### **Rigorous environmental impact assessment**

- **Mandate independent assessment of biodiversity and climate impacts at both plan and site level.** Develop and use robust metrics, such as Biodiversity Intactness Index, whole-life carbon assessments (including both embodied and operational emissions), species loss, habitat fragmentation and impact on threatened species.
- **Assess impacts before applications are submitted.** Ensure early decisions are based on robust data and full use is made of the mitigation hierarchy.



### **Strengthen monitoring and enforcement**

- **Close the implementation gap** by resourcing planning departments with trained staff dedicated to enforcement.
- **Ensure conditions are enforceable and proven**, e.g. requiring photographic or measurable evidence before discharging planning conditions.
- **Enable community-led monitoring of biodiversity outcomes** to increase accountability and support long-term stewardship.
- **Include planning outcomes monitoring in local authority performance targets.** This ensures local authorities are judged by the quality and impact of their planning, not just how fast they process applications.



### **Empower communities in nature restoration**

- **Involve communities in biodiversity plans for developments.**
- **Support local, adaptive restoration.** Communities are well-placed to lead place-based nature recovery that responds to changing needs on the ground.
- **Sustain long-term gains.** Community involvement extends care beyond the construction phase, helping to sustain restoration efforts.



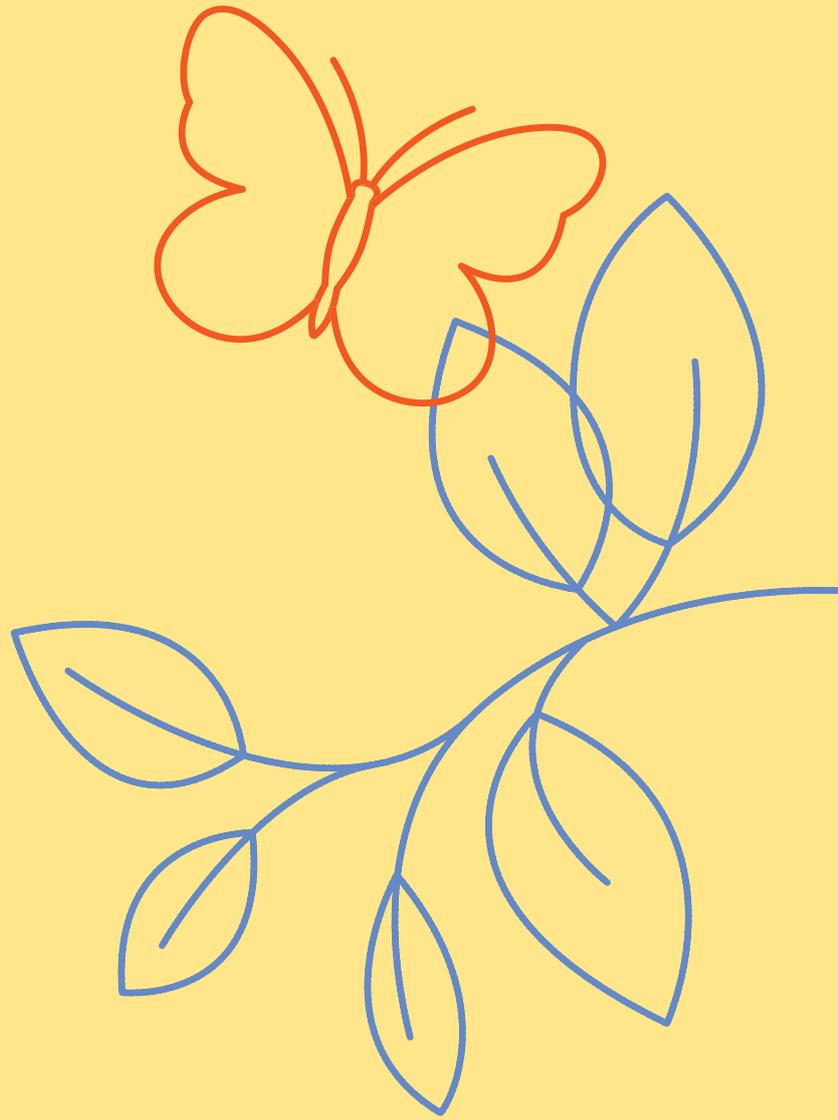
### **Improve ecological standards and expertise**

- **Produce clear national guidance** on biodiversity protection and enhancement to ensure consistency across Scotland.
- **Ensure all planning authorities have in-house environmental specialists** with expertise in biodiversity, ecosystems and climate adaptation.
- **Improve ecological input.**
  - Standardise data sources and expectations for consultants. Some reports downplay impacts or use outdated or incomplete data to suit developer needs. Planners aren't ecologists - they need assessments they can rely on and compare.
  - Create a certification scheme for ecological assessments. This ensures that ecologists follow recognised standards in how they assess biodiversity, habitats and species impacts. It reduces the submission of low-quality, vague or misleading assessments often used to greenlight harmful developments.
  - Provide councils with resources and revenue to support ecology teams. This stops planners having to rely on consultants hired by developers - which can create conflicts of interest or result in poor-quality assessments going unchallenged. With internal expertise, councils can properly scrutinise ecological claims, conditions or mitigation proposals.



**End harmful practices and plan ahead**

- Prohibit or tightly restrict peat extraction in development projects due to its high climate cost.
- Require all decisions to integrate the Scottish Environment Protection Agency SEPA’s climate vulnerability mapping. These maps identify areas most vulnerable to climate-related risks. By embedding this data in planning processes, authorities can avoid putting new development in high-risk areas and design infrastructure to better withstand future climate impacts.





# Ending the housing crisis

Homes for people not profit

## THE CHALLENGE

# Profit over people creates an endless housing crisis

Providing decent, affordable housing for all, in healthy environments, is key to realising a fairer society and is rightly a major planning priority. Access to decent housing too often depends on economic circumstances rather than human rights to adequate living standards. The consequences of this housing crisis and the inequality it generates are stark and visible across Scotland. The Scottish Government and many local authorities have declared a housing emergency and nearly 250,000 people are currently on a waiting list for a social home. Meanwhile, house prices have trebled in the past 20 years exacerbating affordability challenges for all.

### Private house builders won't end the housing crisis

Many believe the housing crisis is just a shortage of supply of houses and if we free up more land, developers will build more homes, prices will fall and the housing emergency will go away. But, however much the housebuilders try to convince us, it just isn't in the interests of the volume housebuilding industry to end the housing emergency. Though they would have us believe this and spend a lot of time and money pretending they do.

The big private builders, who currently build about 40% of new homes in Scotland, make their profits by keeping prices high. They do this by buying land, getting planning permission - and then slowly putting up new homes for sale - rather than building as many as possible at once. In other words they drip feed houses onto the market which keeps prices high.

Simply loosening planning rules to allow more private houses to be built won't make housing affordable for most people. Even very large increases in new housing

will not will not reduce prices enough to make them affordable to many. Making housing more affordable and available for those who need it most needs more than planning reform - it requires wider changes in how the economy and taxes work and most importantly, direct public investment to provide more social housing.

### The housing crisis is one of affordability not supply

Building more homes is a key government goal but it won't resolve the main problem of affordability. Much of the new affordable housing comes from deals with private developers (through something called Section 75 agreements), where developers agree to provide a certain amount of so called affordable housing on each development. But this system is flawed as it relies heavily on private sector developers to deliver affordable housing. However developers negotiate less affordable housing than needed, often saying that they can't afford it and it affects projects' viability.

## Confusing housing need and market demand

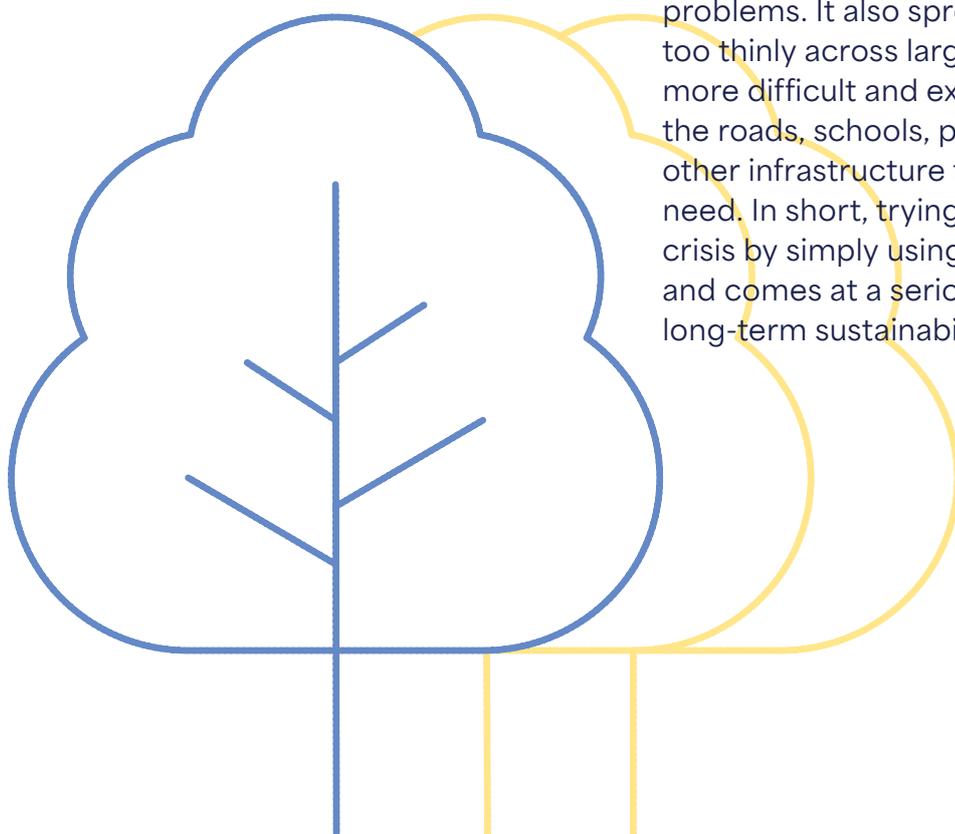
Since developers are focused on making a profit, the homes they build are based on what they can sell, not necessarily on what communities actually need. They choose the size, type and location of housing based on what's most profitable, rather than what would best serve local people or create well-designed, balanced places to live. This means areas that are already popular or wealthy tend to get more development, while less profitable areas are ignored - and those with money are more likely to have their housing needs met, while others are left behind.

## Inefficient land allocation fuels environmental damage

The way we plan for new housing is inefficient and it's damaging to the environment. Housing need and demand assessments (HNDAs) are done to understand future housing requirements for an area and are used to set housing targets. These results are used by the Scottish Government to set housing land targets known as the Minimum All-Tenure Housing Land Requirement (MATHLR) in the National Planning Framework (NPF) 4. These are then translated into Local housing land requirements in Local Development Plans.

But planning authorities are told to set aside far more land for housing than is actually needed. This happens because the system assumes that many sites won't end up being built on due to delays, speculation or developers backing out. So, to be safe, extra land is allocated just in case.

But this over-allocation leads to unnecessary harm. It puts pressure on green spaces and natural habitats, contributing to climate and biodiversity problems. It also spreads development too thinly across large areas, making it more difficult and expensive to provide the roads, schools, public transport and other infrastructure that new communities need. In short, trying to solve the housing crisis by simply using more land is wasteful and comes at a serious cost to nature and long-term sustainability.



## CALLS TO ACTION

Planning should make sure everyone has access to affordable homes, a healthy environment and strong communities - no matter how much money they have. Instead of deepening inequality, planning should help share resources fairly and make sure development benefits people, not just private interests.



**C1**

### **More than just building new houses**

Planning rules can help make sure everyone has a safe, affordable place to live. But simply building more houses won't fix the housing crisis on its own.

We also need other tools, like housing and tax policies, to make sure homes are used for living - not just bought and sold to make money.

For example:

- Renters' rights should be stronger, so people feel secure in their homes.
- Taxes should encourage owners to bring empty or under-used homes back into use, so we make the most of the homes we already have.



**C2**

### **Plan for housing need not market demand**

The way housing need is calculated can be done better. Current methods for calculating housing need in Local Development Plans place significant emphasis on price as an indicator of constrained supply which are interpreted as a signal that more land needs to be allocated for housebuilding. Given the limited role of new housing supply in shaping house prices, this should be revised and replaced with more locally focused assessments of housing need.



**C3**

### **Review the way housing land requirements are calculated**

The Government should review the way housing land requirement (MATHLR) figures are calculated. They should remove the needless "flexibility" or so called 'generosity' figures that result in much more land being allocated than is needed.





### **Proactively develop the right land for housing**

More use should be made of land assembly where lots of smaller, adjacent parcels of land are combined into a single larger site and prepared for development (see E2 on page 32). This proactive way of identifying land helps overcome barriers to development and ensure that sites identified in the LDP are developed (see A1 and A2 on page 11 for how we want sites identified in LDPs) This process should help protect sites not suitable for development and ensure sustainable sites are used for new housing. Land assembly ensures that housing need is met directly and in the most efficient way possible, minimising land take and environmental impacts and reducing speculative development. It can also enable any increases in land value that come from a change of use to housing to be fully captured to fund affordable housing and high-quality infrastructure.



### **Strengthen public and community-led housing**

Scotland needs to move beyond reliance on private sector delivery of new housing by increasing local authority, housing association and community-led housing and supporting alternative models like co-housing, co-ops and community trusts that can deliver housing driven by long term need rather than short-term profit.



### **Ensure accessibility in all new homes**

Ensure Building Regulations require new housing to meet universal accessibility standards, so that homes are suitable for people with disabilities, older residents and others with mobility or sensory needs.

New developments frequently fail to accommodate those with access needs, making them unfit for many. Inclusive design from the outset ensures that housing is future-proof, equitable and responsive to Scotland's ageing population and disabled communities.



# Protecting rights

Justice for people and planet

## THE CHALLENGE

# Scotland's environmental justice gap

Everyone has the right to participate in decisions that affect their environment and should be able to challenge decisions that affect it. These rights are enshrined in the Aarhus Convention.

### Unfair and unaffordable

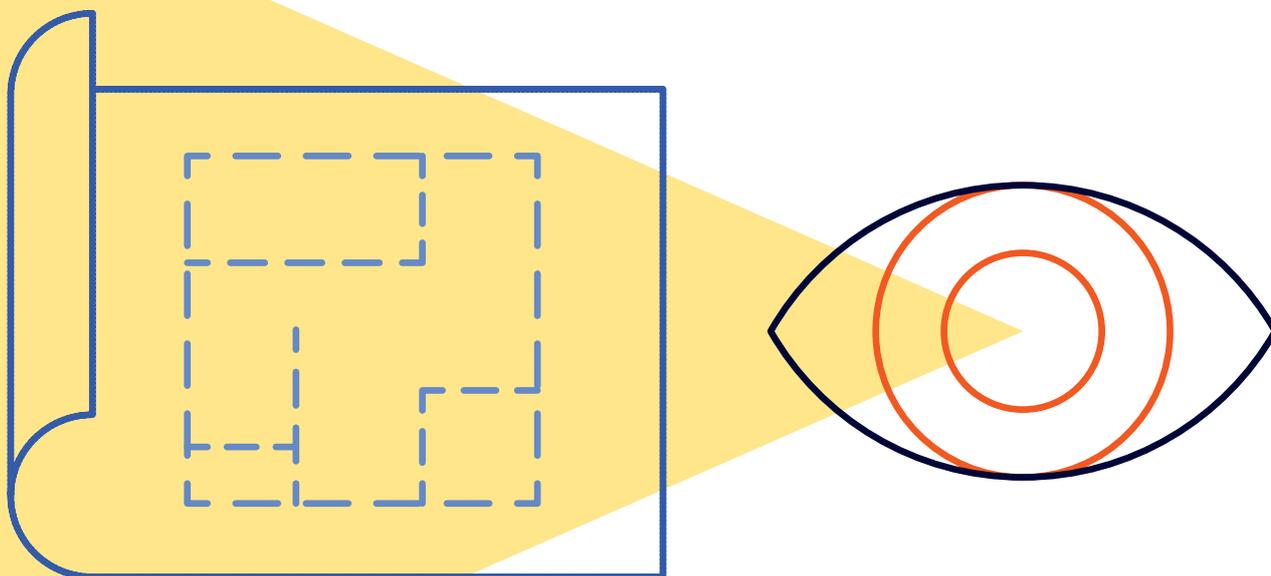
In Scotland, communities have no right to appeal planning decisions, even when developments harm community or environmental health or involve flawed decision-making processes. It can cost tens of thousands of pounds to take a case to court, which means Scotland is violating people's rights to a healthy environment. This injustice is a breach of Scotland's Aarhus Convention commitments to affordable environmental justice. Unlike other areas of public decision-making, communities have no affordable mechanism to challenge planning decisions or flawed processes.

### The right to a healthy environment remains unrecognised

While expected in Scotland's upcoming Human Rights Bill, communities currently have no legal right to environmental protection, leaving them powerless to defend their local ecosystems from harmful development.

### Planning rarely accounts for the historic exclusion of certain groups

Certain people (e.g. racialised communities, travellers, disabled people) have in the past been discriminated against in decisions about land, housing and infrastructure. Without this lens, decisions can perpetuate inequalities by ignoring who is most vulnerable to displacement, poor housing or climate risks.



## CALLS TO ACTION

Scotland needs to strengthen its human and environmental rights legislation to provide vital legal protections for its citizens and the environment.



### **Legally recognise the right to a healthy environment**

Incorporate the right to a healthy environment into the upcoming Scottish Human Rights Bill. This would give individuals and communities the legal standing to hold public bodies and polluters accountable, strengthening environmental protection and access to redress in line with international human rights standards.



### **Improve cultural awareness in planning**

Implement mandatory training for planning professionals on cultural rights, equity and implicit bias.

Training will reduce discrimination and ensure planning decisions reflect the diverse needs of all communities, particularly those historically excluded or misunderstood.



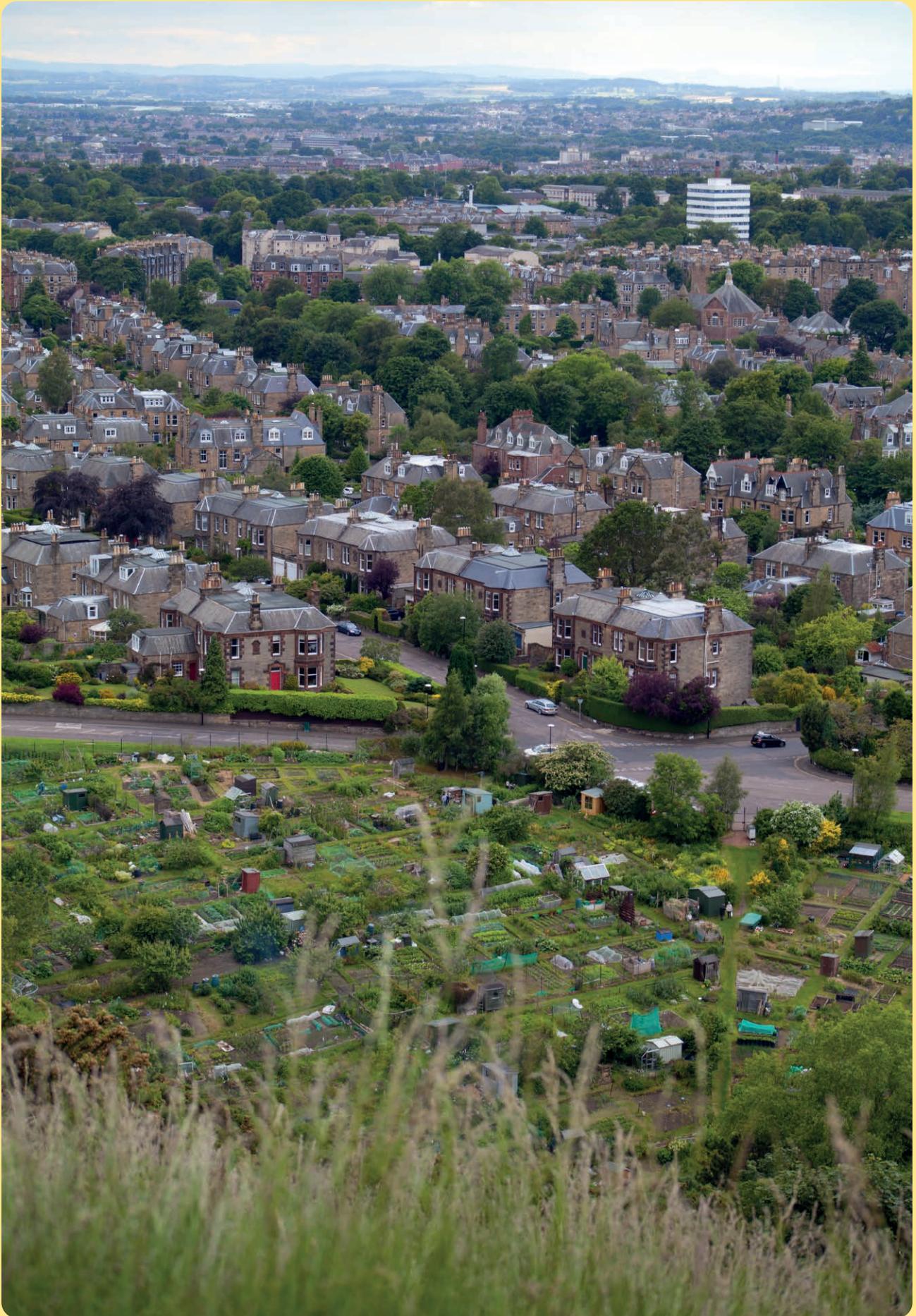
### **Equal right of appeal for communities**

Grant communities the same appeal rights as developers when developments contradict Local Development Plans. This addresses the current democratic imbalance, where only developers can appeal. Communities must have a fair, affordable way to challenge harmful or flawed planning decisions.



### **Strengthen legal protections for community land use**

Introduce stronger legal protections for community land tenure, including long-term leases, renewal rights and safeguards against unjust eviction. Secure tenure empowers communities to plan for the long term, protect local environments and invest in sustainable futures. Communities with secure land tenure can initiate projects, hold authorities accountable and assert their rights in planning processes. Stronger community land rights create the conditions for genuine democratic planning, where local people shape the future of their places.



Edinburgh © Joanna Tkaczuk / Adobe Stock



# Planning for wider systems change

Bigger bolder reform

## THE CHALLENGE

# Communities are unable to shape land use and create community wealth

From the Garden City to the post-war New Towns, the planning tradition in this country was shaped by models of community and public-led development that created the conditions for positive, long-term stewardship of land and development in the public interest. Somewhere along the way, we lost that level of ambition for the planning system in Scotland. After all, as the Scottish Land Commission has shown, the state plays a much more proactive role in assembling land for development in many other European countries, ensuring that sustainable sites get developed with high-quality infrastructure.

### Plans lack power

Scotland's planning system regulates development proposals brought forward by others but has very limited power to proactively realise the aspirations set out in plans. This means there can be no guarantee that democratically agreed priorities will be realised, undermining the huge amounts of effort involved in preparing them. It also leaves the system over-reliant on speculative development proposals that risk exacerbating the housing, climate and nature emergencies and preventing planning from fulfilling its wider potential as a positive force for change.

### Land reform is out of reach for communities

Although Scotland has introduced progressive legislation - such as the Community Empowerment Act (2015) and Land Reform Acts (2003 and 2016) - these legal powers remain costly and complex for communities to make use of. They have also not been meaningfully integrated into the planning process.

### Long-term value is not realised

By limiting the planning system to the regulation of development and land-use change, we have failed to explore the potential that proactive public intervention and investment could play in building long-term community wealth. Speculative development models often result in a short-term focus that ignores the long-term needs of communities. Meanwhile much of the value that is generated by development is realised over time by subsequent owners rather than being retained by the public sector and community bodies.

The changes below would enable the planning system to play a more active role in advancing land reform, renewing local democracy and empowering communities to develop long term solutions to the housing, climate and nature emergencies.

# CALLS TO ACTION



## Scaling up public and community-led development

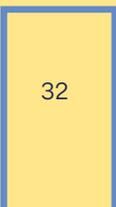
To make more efficient use of land and ensure development of genuinely affordable housing, Scotland should commit to scaling up direct public investment in social and affordable housing through the Affordable Housing Programme.



## Compulsory purchase reform and public-led land assembly

Land assembly is when smaller, neighbouring plots of land are joined together to make one bigger site, usually so new homes, shops, or community spaces can be built. The Scottish Land Commission has suggested that compulsory purchase powers (CPOs), which allow public bodies to buy land when it's needed for the public good, should be used more often to bring land together. This would make it easier to plan housing, build infrastructure like roads and parks up front and support better, more sustainable development.

A key issue in this process is “hope value” – the extra price landowners expect to be paid, based on the possibility that their land might be worth more in the future if it's developed. In England, new rules mean public bodies no longer have to pay this extra cost when buying land for projects like affordable housing and some community groups will soon benefit from this too. By paying only the land's current use value (for example, farmland prices rather than speculative housing prices), it becomes cheaper and simpler to assemble land for development. Scotland is now reviewing its rules and could follow England's example.





**Giving plans real power**

Local Development Plans and Local Place Plans could be transformed into investment plans that set out how local needs and aspirations can be proactively met within environmental limits, with certainty that sites allocated for necessary development will be brought forward.



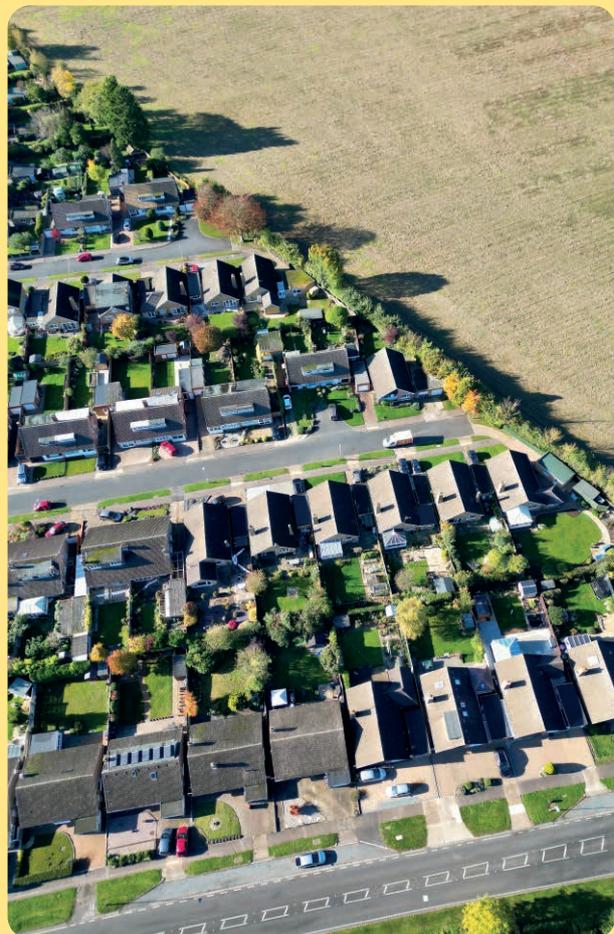
**Investing in long term transformation through land disposal**

Once land is assembled for development, we can take a longer-term perspective when selling it on or transferring ownership. Community-led organisations could be proactively prioritised to advance land reform, build community assets to fund local infrastructure and services, strengthen local democratic control and ensure a just transition into a nature rich, low emission future.



**Funding proactive public planning**

This would require a significant increase in public investment in the development process. The Scottish National Investment Bank’s model of patient, mission-driven finance could be used to begin this process, exploring different public investment and land disposal models. Historical examples, from Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities to the New Towns (that delivered a profit to the Treasury) and contemporary experiences of community land and asset ownership in rural Scotland, all point to the viability and transformative potential of scaling up such approaches through proactive planning.

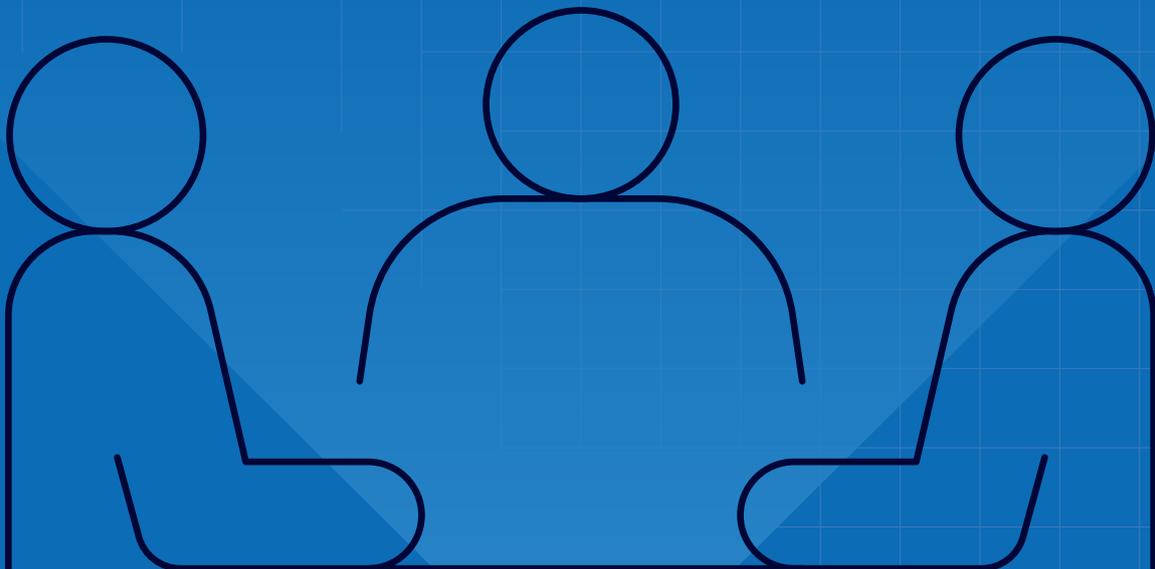


Letchworth Garden City © Altaf Shah / Adobe Stock



# Open and honest planning

Making planning work  
for everyone



## THE CHALLENGE

# Planning fails the public

The planning system should serve the public interest - but instead, it too often works in favour of those with power and money. Engaging in planning requires time, technical knowledge and resources that most communities don't have.

Complex documents, tight deadlines, poor notification systems and inaccessible digital platforms create major barriers - especially for digitally excluded or marginalised groups. Meanwhile, developers benefit from disproportionate influence through private access to officials, professional representation and inside knowledge.



## CALLS TO ACTION



**F1**

### **Make planning accessible**

- Require plain English summaries and alternative formats for all key documents.
- Make sure online planning websites are easy for everyone to use, including people with disabilities.
- Create a publicly owned national planning information platform with consistent, easy-to-navigate content across all authorities.
- Propose dedicated community support officers or hubs to help people understand and participate in the planning process.



**F3**

### **Ensure communities are properly informed and heard**

- Reform the planning application notification system to ensure early and inclusive communication with the wider community, not just those living within 20 metres of a development site.
- Standardise open planning committee meetings with equal speaking rights for community members.



**F2**

### **Provide support and training**

- Introduce mandatory training for Councillors on planning and environmental law, rights and duties. Biodiversity awareness should be included as Councillors making planning decisions need to be more aware of the impact of their decisions on the environment. Utilise a Learning Management System (LMS) to track who has completed the training and maintain detailed records of all training activities.
- Fund independent expert advice for communities from a provider of their choosing.





**Strengthen accountability and enforcement**

- Provide a public route for reporting planning breaches, submitting evidence and tracking how concerns are addressed.
- Establish a community right of appeal when authorities fail to act on clear planning violations. Without this, communities have no recourse when authorities ignore or don't properly enforce violations.



**Make planning transparent**

- Publish all pre-application discussions and lobbying activity. Require local planning authorities to record and publish summaries of all pre-application discussions, including participants, topics discussed and advice given. This helps communities understand how proposals are shaped before they are submitted.
- Local authorities should use online planning dashboards to show: a timeline of engagement on major applications; summaries of meetings; breaches and enforcement actions in clear, accessible formats.
- Provide a public route for communities to report planning breaches, submit evidence and track how concerns are acted upon.
- Complete and publish a national, accessible Land Register and Development Options Register by 2027, covering both public and (where

possible) private land development options, to ensure transparent and democratic oversight of land use.

- Require the full planning history of development sites to be considered. Knowing the full planning history helps planners and committees understand why previous applications were rejected or approved and whether issues raised before have been resolved or ignored. It helps identify patterns of repeat applications where developers resubmit similar proposals until they succeed.
- Require a standardised and publicly accessible register of financial and personal interests specifically for elected planning decision-makers, along with disclosure of any meetings or lobbying activity related to planning applications. This would help ensure decisions are not influenced by undeclared private relationships or benefits.



**Commit to oversight and accountability**

- Establish regular, independent monitoring of planning reform implementation and participation outcomes through Audit Scotland or a dedicated planning watchdog. Ensure findings are published and include community feedback.
- Include these findings in the next Open Government National Action Plan, reinforcing long-term focus on transparency, accountability and democratic participation.





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