

A call to action: Scotland in your hands



Scottish Elections 2026

www.socialworkscotland.org

Introduction

We want 'Scotland in your hands' to support you whether you're standing for election or newly elected. We also hope its work is meaningful to social workers, and to anyone who receives supports or cares for someone who does. We hope you find something here that resonates with you and inspires you.

In 2026 Scotland elects a new parliament and a new Scottish Government. The campaign will shape public debate, and the election itself will determine priorities for policy and public spending beyond 2030, affecting everyone.

Our call to action sets out the key things that Scotland's politicians can focus on to improve lives. Our members raise these issues to be considered not just in the parliamentary campaign, but in the months after too, as new Ministers prepare their programme for government and budget. There has never been a better time to harness the power of people; Scotland's communities are calling out for change. With bravery and determination, political leaders can make it possible for everyone in Scotland to know what it feels like to have a secure home, fair income, practical support, and the foundations for a fulfilling, dignified life.

Politicians have the power and the levers to meaningfully shift our public spending towards what truly makes a difference. Investing in accessible care for everyone, community strength, and economic resilience will truly improve our society while reducing the need for crisis-driven responses such as children's secure care.

Real change that people notice in their everyday lives depends on action, not just words. In the following four sections, we set out our recommendations for the steps that will make this vision a reality.

1. Help us shift the way we see and support people

Scotland's politicians have built a fantastic legacy over the last 26 years of devolved power, achieving a great deal. Now a different approach is needed to make real progress in the deep-rooted, complex issues like poverty and the impact of substance use, where progress is slow.

It's in our power to move away from the medical lens that is commonly used to understand and tackle poverty and other issues. We now know that this approach has not meaningfully improved how people live. Social work itself offers a different perspective, grounded by seeing people in the raw, complex realities of their relationships, physical environments and histories. By using a social lens, Scotland's politicians, professionals, and communities can work together to address underlying causes instead of firefighting symptoms.

Strengthening social services will create the conditions in which social workers can make real difference to people and communities. To make this possible, you can:

Prioritise accessible, community-based policies, funding, and services that support and protect people early on, based on their needs and relationships.

Explicitly endorse the Scottish Social Work Partnership's plan for the renewal and reinvigoration of social work services.

Commit to the development of a national framework for pay and conditions for social work services, equivalent to other professions/public services, supported by local authorities and trade unions.

Encourage and enable new technologies that help people live independently longer and allow professionals to focus on people, not paperwork.



2. A national conversation about social work and social care



Scotland has become more diverse, with people living longer and with a wider range of needs. We should be proud of this progress; and with it comes a responsibility to invest more in social work and social care. Everyone - families and the government alike, will be spending more on supporting people to live, learn, work, stay safe, and be part of their communities. We all benefit from social care and social work investment, whether that's quality time with a grandparent, parent or child, or the vital support and protection to live a meaningful life of your own.

The next Scottish government has the power to decide how this investment is used. It can build strong, sustainable services that help people live independently and safely, and stay connected to their communities, or it can simply respond to emergencies. The stakes are incredibly high. Choices made now will shape Scotland's future for decades, just as advances in healthcare have shaped our past. These decisions are not easy. And everyone has a right to a say. We urge politicians to start a national conversation about the issues that affect each and every one of us; just as we have in recent referendum campaigns. This was also a key recommendation from the Independent Review of Adult Social Care (Feeley Review).

In the short term, immediate steps can be taken to show how much we value care and those who provide it. You can do this by:

Guaranteeing a minimum of £15 per hour for anyone working in social care by 2028.

Using Scotland's tax and social security systems to recognise the contribution of unpaid carers.

Revisit the finance recommendations from the Independent Review of Adult Social Care.

3. Put poverty behind us

Many people in Scotland experience poverty and inequality. Everyone should be able to heat their home, eat well, and contribute to their community. Without these basic building blocks, all efforts to address the many other forms of poverty and inequality that exist in Scotland are undermined.



Social workers often support people whose lives are deeply affected by poverty in many different forms.

Ending poverty must be the central objective of both Parliament and government. We need to invest in a better future for our children, our neighbours, and our communities. To achieve this, you can:

Implement the Minimum Income Guarantee by 2030.

Increase investment in the physical infrastructure which underpins local communities; in particular, increasing the availability of affordable and accessible housing.

4. Empower Scotland's people through devolution to local communities

Scotland's political system has changed a lot in the last 26 years. It has built power structures to centralise decisions, support consistency across our communities, rural, urban, highlands and islands. These structures have served us well for some services, but they won't see us into the future we need, post-pandemic and beyond. The changes we want individually - for our own community, town, organisation or profession - often feel ignored and that's because these structures are now getting in the way.

The politicians stepping into power need to be bold, and feel confident to dismantle those distancing structures, and empower people. We all deserve a say in how we live our lives and receive support when we need it. And that means pushing power down through Scotland's governing structures, away from the centre, towards local areas and services. To empower people, you can:

Use national policy to set a vision for Scotland and use the annual national budget to allocate resources for that policy over a rolling 3+ year horizon. Then let local areas lead delivery.

Focus on real, day-to-day improvements rather than legislation. You can commit to reduce the number of legislative Bills and statutory instruments introduced each year, giving more time for scrutiny and better implementation.



Conclusion

Scotland stands at a pivotal moment. The choices made in the 2026 election will shape our communities, services, and the wellbeing of everyone for decades to come. Real change depends on action, not just words or ambition, and together, we can make that change possible.

Social workers, and everyone involved in delivering social care support, are critical to that change. We, together with other partners, stand ready to help support you to make a real difference.

By taking these steps, in your role as a politician, you can work together with social workers and communities to build a Scotland where everyone has access to care, community, and opportunity - a country that is fairer, stronger, and more connected for generations to come.



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