

who benefits from  
the **energy transition** in the

# HIGHLANDS

and are we realising its full potential  
for the communities who live here?

**HIGHLAND**  
COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY

A Highland Manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election



# Executive summary

The Highlands are central to Scotland's clean energy future, climate resilience and tourism economy. We are generating enormous national value through our land, our natural capital and our communities.

We strongly support the growth of renewable energy and see the energy transition as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver sustainable development in the Highlands.

But here is the fundamental question: **who benefits?**

At present, significant value is generated in the Highlands, but without effective coordination it is not delivering the outcomes local communities need, who continue to face fuel poverty, a housing crisis, population decline and fragile local services.



At a national level, energy development and community benefit are treated separately, while local activity is fragmented. Funding is disconnected and outcomes are not aligned.

This manifesto sets out a practical and deliverable solution. The Highland Regional Sustainable Investment Plan will align investment, policy and delivery at a regional level, connecting national priorities with communities and organisations delivering change on the ground, so that the value created in the Highlands is coordinated and channelled into local priorities.

This is a once in a generation opportunity.

Handled well it can reduce poverty, create high quality jobs, restore our environment, strengthen communities and build a more resilient Highland economy. Handled poorly it risks repeating a familiar pattern, where value is extracted and communities are left behind.

We are asking Scotland's next government to make a clear choice. Work with us to make the Highlands the first region to fully deliver Community Wealth Building in practice or allow the current system to continue.

The Highlands are ready to lead. The question now is whether policy and investment will align with the people and places creating that value.

# Foreword

The Highlands are already delivering on three of Scotland's key national priorities - clean energy, climate resilience and sustainable economic growth, but the current approach to coordinating investment, policy and delivery is not aligned with the scale of need or the opportunity facing the region.

Substantial public and private investment is already flowing into the region including hundreds of millions of pounds in energy transition community benefit funding. Yet this funding landscape is fragmented across multiple programmes, priorities and governance structures with no single coordinated plan to align investment or manage the cumulative impacts of change.

Policy operates in silos. Delivery is disconnected. Outcomes are not aligned.

Despite the scale of activity and investment, the Highlands are not yet achieving the level of economic, social and environmental impact this transition should deliver, and the full potential is not being realised for communities across the region.

The opportunity now is to better align and coordinate this activity at a regional level, giving communities the ability to lead, shape and benefit from the transition.

The Highland Regional Sustainable Investment Plan provides a practical solution to align investment, restore natural capital, strengthen local economies and ensure that value is retained and reinvested where it is created.

With the right vision and ambition, the Highlands can also revitalise its tourism economy and establish itself as a global leader in sustainable development.

This now comes down to political choice.

We are asking Scotland's next government to invest £2 million, align policy and funding, and work with us to make the Highlands the first region to fully deliver Community Wealth Building in practice - setting a new standard for how national priorities are delivered in partnership with communities.

**Yvonne Crook**  
**Chair, Highland CIC**

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# The stark reality behind the opportunity

The Highlands are not starting the energy transition from a position of strength.

One in three households is fuel poor. Nearly 10,000 children live in poverty. Energy costs are among the highest in the UK and many households are off the gas grid and exposed to volatile global prices.

The Highland region is the engine of Scotland's renewable energy system. It is a major contributor to the UK's renewable energy supply.

Yet the region producing much of Scotland's clean energy is paying some of the highest costs to heat its homes.

This reflects a long standing pattern. For decades value has been generated from Highland land, labour and resources but too little has remained locally. The energy transition risks accelerating that pattern unless it is deliberately redesigned.

This manifesto is about correcting that imbalance.

# The Highlands are foundational to Scotland's future

The Highlands are not a peripheral contributor to the energy transition. They are foundational.

Scotland's renewable capacity must more than triple by 2035. The Highlands hosts the land, grid and infrastructure required to deliver it. SSEN Transmission's network alone aims to deliver 20% of Great Britain's clean power.

This is infrastructure on a scale never before experienced in the region and what is being asked of Highland landscapes and communities is unprecedented.

Scotland has an energy consenting system and a community development system but they operate separately, led by different ministers, measured by different outcomes and accountable to different structures.

Billions of pounds of renewable investment flow through Highland communities. Planning approvals are granted. Community benefit funds are paid. Yet families remain in poverty and young people continue to leave because wages do not cover the cost of living.

The issue is not a lack of investment. The money exists. The problem is that it is not connected to the people and places it should serve.



**Energy is measured in megawatts. Tourism in visitor numbers. Housing in units. Community investment in fragmented funds. But no one is accountable for what happens between them and that is where Highland communities live.**

## Climate: a national asset at risk

The Highlands are central to Scotland's ability to meet its climate obligations.

Peatlands in the Highlands store over 1.6 billion tonnes of carbon which is more than 140 years of Scotland's emissions yet more than 70% is degraded.

The same landscapes hosting renewable infrastructure are also critical to carbon storage, biodiversity and climate resilience and they underpin Scotland's global tourism offer.

Scotland cannot meet its net zero commitments while continuing to degrade the natural systems that support them.

This requires coordinated long term investment in peatland restoration, natural capital, climate resilience at landscape scale and a more sustainable tourism model. It requires a shift from extracting value from the environment to investing in its restoration and long term resilience.

# Tourism: from volume to value

The Highlands drive a significant share of Scotland's tourism economy but the current model is unsustainable.

Over the past 14 years visitor numbers have increased by nearly 65% while economic value has grown by just over 20%. This has created a high volume and low value tourism economy that places pressure on communities, infrastructure and the environment while many businesses struggle to invest and grow sustainably.

The Highlands need a tourism strategy and sustained investment that shifts from volume to value and aligns visitor activity with community wellbeing, environmental stewardship and long term prosperity.

A new innovative partnership between Highland Tourism and the Highland Renewables Network through Highland CIC creates an opportunity for tourism and renewable energy to invest together in communities and landscapes.



# People and place: communities under pressure

Sustaining communities in the Highlands is fundamental to Scotland's economic and environmental future.

Housing is increasingly unaffordable or unavailable. Key workers cannot find homes. Young people are leaving. Essential services are under pressure and often rely on overstretched local provision. Communities are being asked to absorb the impacts of rising costs, fragile infrastructure, population change, over-tourism and expanding development without the long term investment needed to remain resilient.

These are not separate issues. They are the lived consequences of a system where significant value is generated in the Highlands but is unevenly distributed, leaving many communities without the investment they need.

A successful energy transition must be judged not only by economic output or environmental targets, but by whether it improves everyday life. It must reduce poverty, improve access to housing and opportunities for young people, support local businesses, sustain tourism and strengthen communities.

Without a clear strategic framework to align investment and delivery, the transition may succeed economically, but it will fail the people and places expected to deliver it.





# The opportunity: a regional model

This is not a resource challenge. It is a systems challenge.

By aligning investment, policy and delivery at a regional level the Highlands can move from fragmented activity to a coordinated model that delivers environmental restoration, economic resilience and stronger communities together.

That is the purpose of the Highland Regional Sustainable Investment Plan. It ensures that value created in the Highlands is captured, coordinated and reinvested for the people and places that sustain it.

## Why Highland CIC?

Highland CIC is a regional platform for shared community leadership bringing together more than 45 partner organisations, more than 200 ambassadors and community leaders and more than £1.2 million already committed in private investment.

This is a proven foundation not a proposal. Highland CIC brings together an established network already delivering a new model of regional collaboration based on voluntary partnership, shared incentives and co-investment. Governance will be transparent, independently overseen and publicly reported.

This plan is about coordination - aligning investment, policy and delivery to maximise impact for communities and the organisations delivering change on the ground.

It does not introduce new taxes or levies. It does not change planning or consenting. It does not replace community benefit funds and it does not create a new public body.

It aligns investment to deliver greater regional impact and long term legacy.



# What the plan will deliver

The Highland Regional Sustainable Investment Plan will establish the Highlands as Scotland's leading model for delivering Community Wealth Building and sustainable development at scale.

## **Within 24 months, the plan will:**

- > Strengthen Highland CIC as a regional delivery platform, coordinating investment, partnerships and delivery at scale
- > Embed Community Wealth Building - retaining and reinvesting value locally
- > Work in partnership with the public sector to align national priorities with place-based implementation and outcomes
- > Engage communities and regional partners through a mission-aligned affiliate network, shaping priorities and co-designing solutions
- > Develop an integrated regional intelligence platform (GIS), building on existing data to connect energy, climate, tourism, housing, poverty and infrastructure
- > Pilot new approaches to community benefit, enabling more coordinated, long-term impact where communities choose to collaborate at a regional level
- > Develop investment-ready projects and early pilots, translating regional priorities into scalable, fundable opportunities with measurable social, economic and environmental impact
- > Launch a flagship demonstrator (Loch Ness), integrating energy, tourism and community benefit within a single place-based model
- > Develop a strategic regional investment fund, with clear governance and cross-stakeholder representation
- > Position the Highlands to attract and unlock global sustainable finance through a strong pipeline of investable opportunities

## The funding ask: £2 Million

We are seeking £1 million per year for two years as a catalytic fund to support regional coordination and delivery capacity, development of an investment ready financial structure, pilot projects with measurable outcomes and a flagship demonstrator.

This builds on more than £1.2 million already committed in private investment and is designed to unlock significantly greater long term investment into the Highlands.

# The policy asks

Make the Highlands Scotland's first fully integrated Community Wealth Building region.

The Highlands must be designated as the first region where the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill is implemented in full, establishing a national model for aligning energy, tourism, community wealth building and regional development within a single, coordinated framework for sustainable development.



This represents a transformational opportunity to deliver systemic change, aligning investment, policy and delivery at regional scale, and empowering communities to work in partnership with government and public sector. This must include:

- > Formal designation of the Highland Regional Sustainable Investment Plan as the delivery model
- > A Highland-specific outcomes framework, aligned to sustainable development, covering:
  - > Reduction in poverty
  - > Population retention and growth
  - > Access to affordable housing
  - > Skills development, employment and workforce resilience
  - > Strengthened social care and essential services
  - > Expanded opportunities for young people
  - > Transition to a more sustainable, higher-value tourism model
  - > Community wealth creation, retention and fair distribution of value
  - > A clear regional ambition and vision capable of attracting significant external sustainable investment
  - > Annual statutory reporting across relevant government portfolios, ensuring accountability for delivering joined-up outcomes at regional scale

# Delivering for Scotland's national priorities

The Highlands is central to delivering Scotland's national priorities, including:

- > Clean energy generation at scale, supporting the transition to net zero
- > Climate resilience, through the protection and restoration of vast peatland carbon stores
- > Tourism, as a major contributor to the national economy and international reputation

This plan ensures that the value created in delivering these national priorities is retained more effectively at a regional level, strengthening Highland communities while supporting inclusive growth and long-term sustainability across Scotland as a whole.

## Conclusion

**The Highlands are already leading.**

**This plan changes the answer to a simple question. Who benefits?**

**It ensures that the people and places creating value share directly in it, which will strengthen the Highlands and strengthen Scotland.**

**Now the question is whether Scotland's next government will match that leadership and ensure the Highlands share in the value it creates or allow the current system to continue.**





**Yvonne Crook,**  
Chair & Founding Director,  
Highland CIC



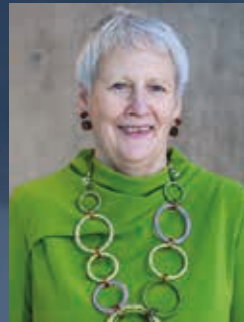
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