Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Migration: supporting the future of Scotland's economy and communities

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Ministerial Foreword

Scotland's future economic wellbeing depends on the choices we make now and across this parliament, ensuring that more young people can join the workforce and contribute to our future success. However, the latest Scottish population statistics, when considered in tandem with the latest UK migration data, provide a clear message: that without action, Scotland's population is expected to begin declining in the coming decades as deaths increasingly outnumber births, while the number of older people grows significantly and the number of younger people and working-age adults falls. The inward migration of working-age people and their families is the main way we are able to mitigate the impact of these changes, meaning that migration will play an increasingly important role in supporting our economy, public services and communities in the years ahead.

The data also shows that Scotland remains an attractive destination. In the year to mid-2025, Scotland continued to experience positive net migration, including a net inflow of people from the rest of the UK. This extends a long-standing trend, with more people moving to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK than leaving in every year over the past 25 years.

That enduring attractiveness is not accidental. It reflects Scotland's strengths as a place to live, work, study and raise a family, and the actions taken within devolved responsibilities to support inclusive economic growth, strong public services and vibrant communities. The fact that Scotland continues to attract a net-positive number of people from the UK demonstrates the appeal of that approach. It also underlines a wider point made throughout this paper: people are choosing Scotland, but Scotland does not currently have the migration powers needed to capitalise on its attractiveness to a wider international audience.

The evidence suggests that, with an immigration system better aligned to Scotland's demographic, economic and geographic circumstances, we can improve our confidence in maintaining a sustainable working age population. A migration system that supports population sustainability alongside economic growth, and which recognises the differing needs of communities across Scotland, would strengthen our ability to attract and retain the people needed to support businesses, public services and communities in every part of the country. However, the latest population projections and migration figures make clear that this opportunity cannot be taken for granted.

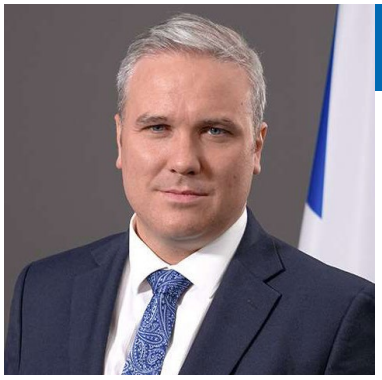
These challenges are not felt equally across Scotland, nor indeed across the UK. In some of our rural and island communities, demographic pressures are already acute. Population change affects far more than the labour market. It influences whether schools remain open, whether local businesses can grow, whether essential services can be sustained, and whether communities continue to thrive. As this paper makes clear, communities need people, not just skills.

That is why this publication marks a clear line in the sand. Scotland's demographic realities demand renewed and meaningful engagement from the UK Government on the case for an immigration system which is aligned to Scotland's needs. A migration system designed around UK-wide averages cannot adequately respond to Scotland's distinct demographic and geographic circumstances. Indeed, none of the UK's nations, or even regions, look like the average of the UK when it comes to migration, labour market conditions, or population change, because of the outsized impact that London has on those averages.

Recent changes to the immigration system have too often moved in the opposite direction to Scotland's needs and values on migration. Higher salary thresholds, tighter restrictions on family migration, reduced opportunities for international graduates, and proposals that make settlement more difficult risk undermining Scotland's ability to attract and retain the people our economy and communities require. These policy changes place too much emphasis on salary levels as a measure of contribution and fail to recognise the important social value of people working across a wide range of occupations and sectors across different parts of the country.

The Scottish Government continues to believe that migration policy should support sustainable population growth, economic opportunity and community resilience. This paper sets out practical proposals to help achieve that aim. Whether through greater flexibility within the current immigration system, the devolution of immigration powers to Scotland, or the opportunities that independence would provide, Scotland should have the ability to shape migration policy in a way that reflects its own demographic and economic needs.

The UK Government has spoken of the benefits that can come from devolving decision-making and enabling different parts of the UK to respond to their own circumstances. I hope this paper provides the foundation for renewed engagement on how a more tailored approach to migration can help Scotland support its communities and fulfil its ambitions for economic growth.



Tom Arthur MSP
Minister for Business and Fair Work

Scotland's Demographic Position

Scotland's population is changing in ways that will have significant implications for the country's economy, workforce, public services and communities, and which highlights the role that the immigration system has to play in supporting Scotland's demographic profile and economic prosperity.

Recent population statistics show that Scotland is entering a period of slower population growth, population ageing and, ultimately, population decline. At the same time, net migration to the UK has fallen sharply from recent record highs, changing the wider context in which Scotland's future population and labour market needs must be considered.

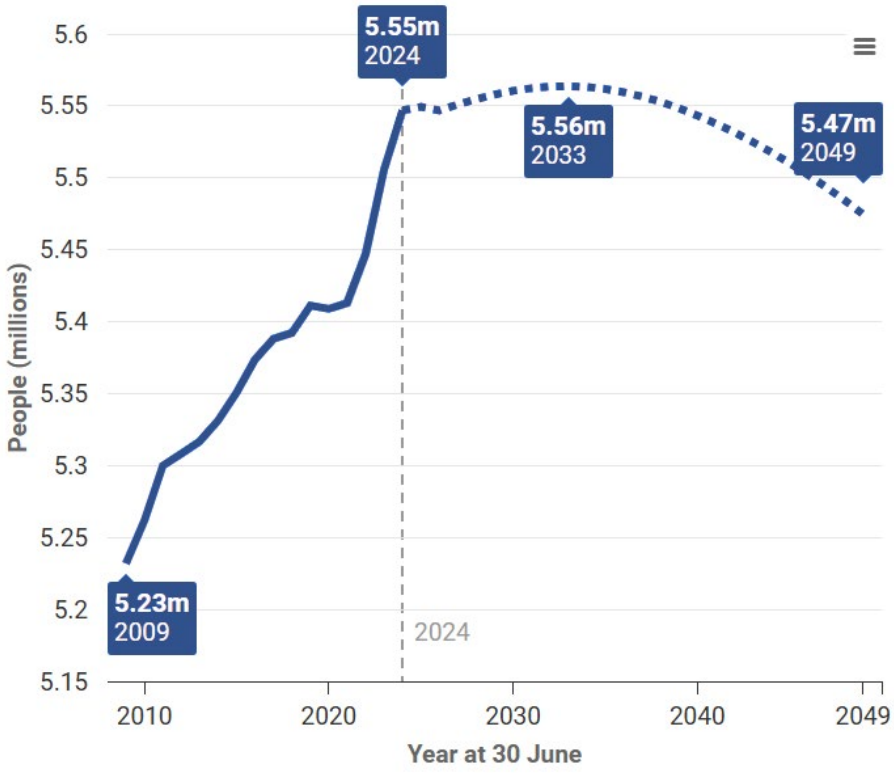
The fact that people are living longer is to be welcomed. However, as fewer children are being born and more people are reaching older ages, migration will be increasingly required to support Scotland's working age population, and thereby support population sustainability, economic growth and community resilience across Scotland.

Population growth is slowing

Scotland's population has grown over recent decades and is currently at a historically high level, increasing from 5.11 million to 5.55 million over the past twenty years. However, the latest National Records of Scotland (NRS) projections suggest this period of growth is coming to an end.

The projections show that Scotland's total population will remain broadly stable until the early 2030s before entering a period of sustained decline. Between mid-2024 and mid-2033, the population is expected to grow by just 0.3%, reaching approximately 5.56 million. Thereafter, it is projected to fall year-on-year, declining to around 5.47 million by mid-2049, a reduction of 1.3% over the 25-year period since mid-2024.[1]

Figure 1: estimated and projected population of Scotland, mid-2009 to mid-2049[2]

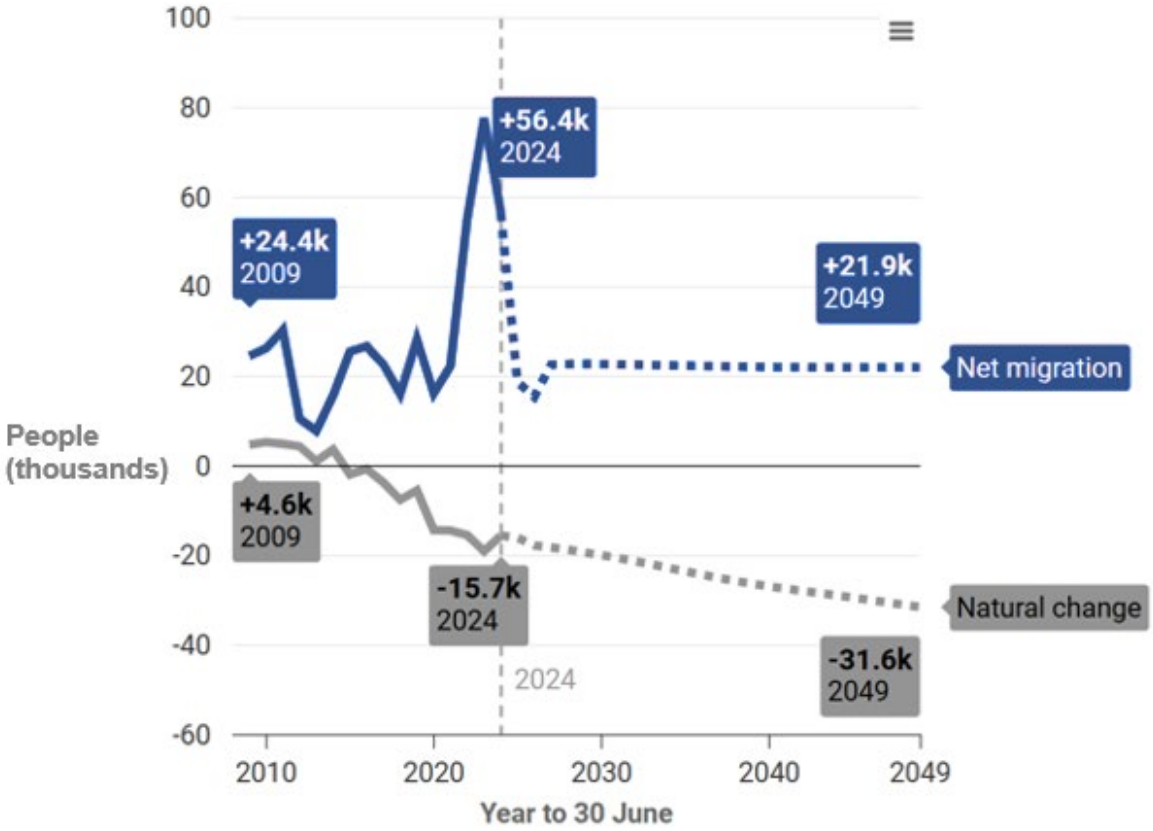


1 National Records of Scotland (2026b)

2 National Records of Scotland (2026b) Figure 1: Scotland's population is projected to decrease to 5.47 million by mid-2049

The principal driver of this trend is negative natural population change driven by the number of deaths outnumbering births, reflecting long-term trends of lower birth rates and an ageing population. While net migration to Scotland is projected to remain positive, it is not expected to continue to offset this decline.

Figure 2: estimated and projected net migration and natural change, mid-2009 to mid-2049[3]



These projections mark an important shift in Scotland's demographic outlook. Given the projected decline in the level of net migration from recent high levels, future population growth in Scotland can no longer be assumed without a change in policy approach which would bolster levels of inward migration.

Lower migration to the UK

The demographic challenge facing Scotland must also be considered alongside recent changes in UK migration patterns.

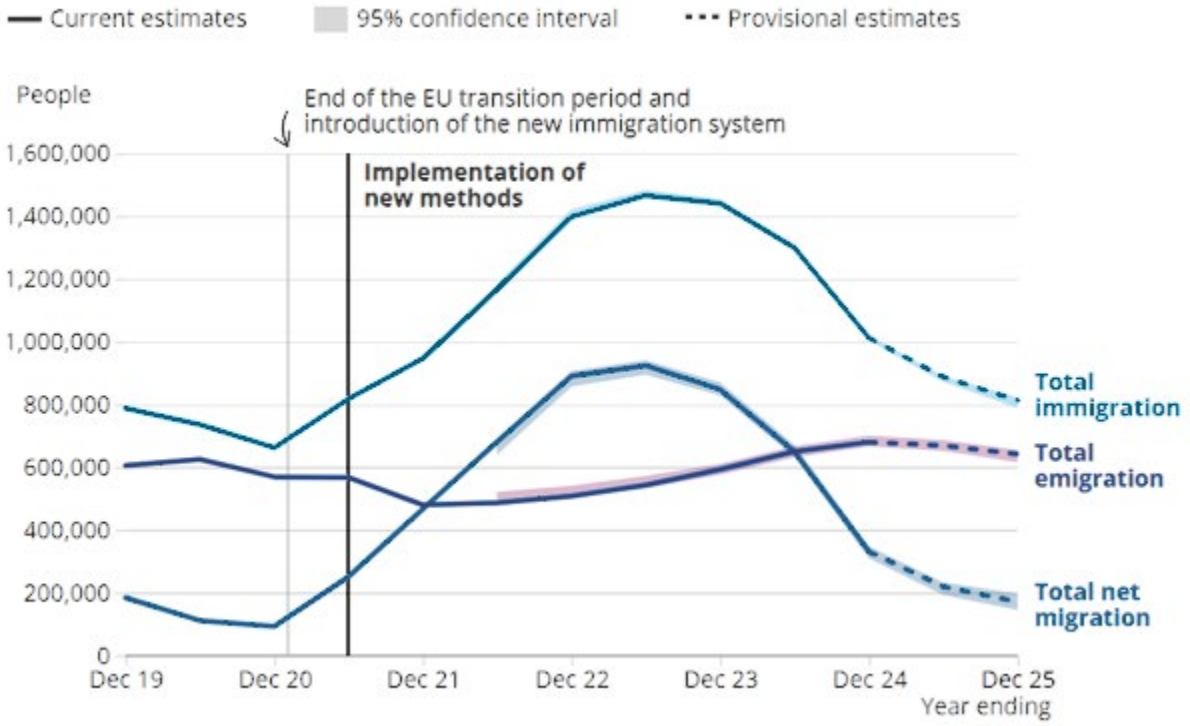
Following record levels of migration in 2022 and 2023, UK net migration has fallen sharply. Net migration reached approximately 944,000 in the year ending March 2023, before declining to 331,000 in the year ending December 2024 and falling further to 171,000 in the year ending December 2025. This represents an overall reduction of around 82% from the 2023 peak.

The reduction has been driven primarily by lower numbers arriving on work and study visas, alongside increasing levels of emigration.[4]

3 National Records of Scotland (2026b) Figure 2: Scotland's population is projected to fall steadily from mid-2034

4 Office for National Statistics (2026c) 4. Long-term migration & 5. Long-term emigration

Figure 3: total long-term net migration, immigration and emigration in the UK, year ending December 2019 to year ending December 2025[5]



This changing migration picture is particularly significant for Scotland, given that, despite migration levels being projected to remain well below the recent peak, the UK as a whole is not projected to experience population decline below its current level over the coming decades. Consequently, reductions in migration have potentially greater implications for Scotland's future population growth, workforce availability and economic performance than for other parts of the UK.

Migration from the UK to Scotland

In the year to mid-2025, latest estimates show that 50,200 people moved from the rest of the UK to Scotland, while 41,600 people moved from Scotland to the rest of the UK, resulting in a net migration gain of +8,600 for Scotland.[6]

Recent trends show that Scotland has consistently attracted more people from the rest of the UK than it has lost, with inflows reaching a recent peak in 2021 and remaining relatively high thereafter. Although the number of people leaving Scotland increased in the year to mid-2025, Scotland continued to record a net gain from migration with the rest of the UK, demonstrating its ongoing ability to attract more people than it loses to other parts of the UK.

5 Office for National Statistics (2026c) Figure 2: long-term net migration continues to fall

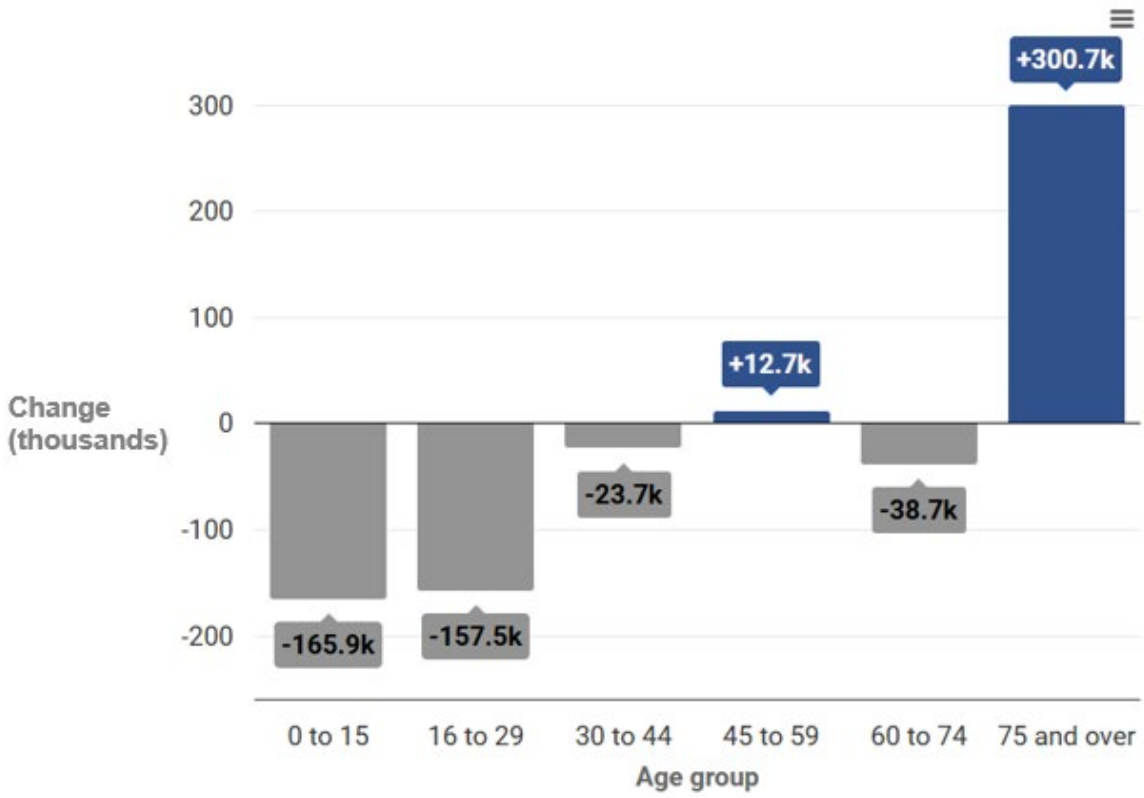
6 National Records of Scotland (2026a), Moves between Scotland and the rest of the UK

An ageing population

Alongside projected population decline, Scotland's population is also expected to become significantly older.

Between mid-2024 and mid-2049, the number of people aged 75 and over is projected to increase by more than 300,000.[7] Over the same period, the number of children aged 0-15 is projected to fall by over 165,000, while the number of young adults aged 16-29 is projected to decrease by almost the same amount, together representing a decline in the number of young people in Scotland of more than 320,000.

Figure 4: projected population change by age group, mid-2024 to mid-2049[8]

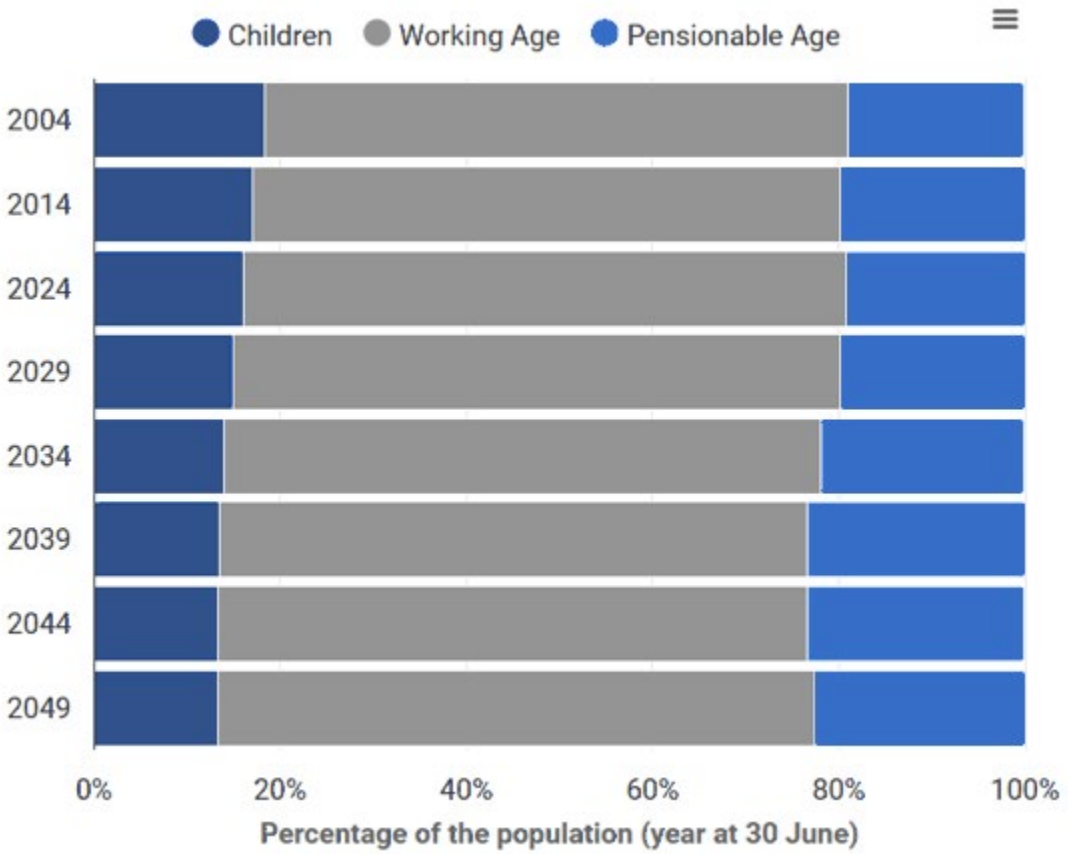


The proportion of Scotland's population above pension-age is projected to increase from 19.2% in mid-2024 to 22.5% by mid-2049. In contrast, the working-age share of the population is expected to fall slightly from 64.6% to 64.1%.

7 National Records of Scotland (2026b), Figure 7: the largest increase in population over the 25 years to mid-2049 is projected to be in the 75 and over age group

8 National Records of Scotland (2026b), Figure 7: the largest increase in population over the 25 years to mid-2049 is projected to be in the 75 and over age group

Figure 5: estimated and projected population by age group, mid-2004 to mid-2049[9]



An older population is also likely to mean growing demand for healthcare, social care and other public services, together with increased pressure on the working-age population that supports those services.

Implications for Scotland's workforce

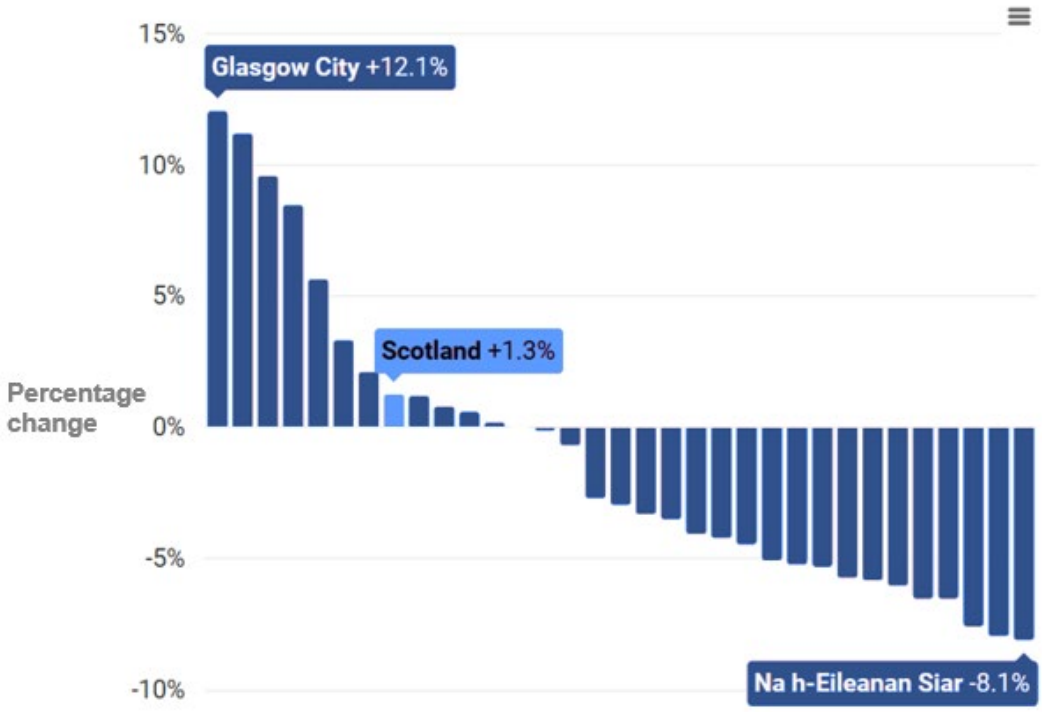
These demographic changes are already affecting Scotland's labour market.

Over the coming decades, it is expected that large numbers of workers will retire whilst fewer younger people enter the workforce. Although the projected decline in the working-age population is relatively modest at a national level, the impact is likely to be more pronounced in particular sectors and geographies. For example, recent population estimates show that, over the decade to mid-2025, a number of council areas, including Na h-Eileanan Siar, Shetland Islands and Dumfries and Galloway have experienced declines in both their working-age population and the number of children. At a broader level, population estimates indicate that 20 of Scotland's 32 local authority areas saw overall population decline during the most recent reporting year.[10]

9 National Records of Scotland (2026b), Figure 8: the working age population accounted for 64.6% of all people living in Scotland in mid-2024, and this is projected to decline to 64.1% by mid-2049

10 National Records of Scotland (2026a), Population change across Scotland

Figure 6: percentage change in 16-64 age group by council area, 2015 to 2025[11]



The challenge to support Scotland's working-age population is not only about skills development, but also about having people available to fill roles. As larger generational cohorts retire, fewer younger workers will be available to take their place. Historically, migration has helped alleviate these pressures by increasing the number of working-age people in Scotland and helping employers meet labour and skills needs across a range of sectors.

Conclusion

Recent population projections reinforce the scale of demographic change that Scotland may undergo in coming decades. Population growth is expected to stall and eventually reverse, the population will become older, and many communities are likely to face growing workforce and service pressures.

At the same time, the sharp decline in UK migration from recent record highs has altered the impact that positive net migration can be expected to have in offsetting domestic population decline. While migration alone cannot reverse all of Scotland's demographic challenges and is not the only lever available to support population sustainability, workforce growth and public services, the latest evidence suggests that it will become increasingly important in the decades ahead.

11 National Records of Scotland (2026a), Figure 12: the number of people aged 16 to 64 years has decreased in most council areas since 2015

Supporting Scotland's Communities, Economy and Future Population

Supporting communities across Scotland

Scotland's demographic and economic circumstances mean that migration is an important part of supporting sustainable communities, public services and long-term economic growth.

Population ageing, low birth rates and, in some areas, the outmigration of younger people are reducing the size of Scotland's working-age population. These trends affect not only labour supply, but also school rolls, public services, community organisations, businesses, and the long-term sustainability of places and communities across Scotland. The challenges are often most acute in rural and island communities, where population decline and ageing populations can threaten the viability of local economies and services.[12]

These should not be seen solely as local challenges. Rural and island communities support industries, supply chains and economic activity that benefit Scotland and the wider UK. Their contribution extends far beyond their population size. In 2024, Scotland accounted for 8.1% of total employment across Great Britain but 17.8% of employment in agriculture, forestry and fishing.[13] In Scotland's islands and remote rural areas, these sectors account for 16.5% of all employment.[14]

An immigration system designed primarily around UK-wide averages may not always respond effectively to these local circumstances. Occupations that are essential to sustaining particular communities can appear less significant when viewed through national labour market indicators, despite their importance to local economies, public services and wider UK supply chains.

For Scotland, migration is therefore about more than addressing labour shortages. It supports population sustainability, public services, schools, local economies and community resilience. Communities require people across a range of occupations, sectors and life stages. Economic and social sustainability depends not only on highly skilled professionals, but also on care workers, hospitality staff, agricultural workers, tradespeople, entrepreneurs, students and families.

Improving domestic skills, increasing labour market participation and boosting productivity will remain important.[15] The Scottish Government is already taking action to address these key issues, including working with local authorities and economic development agencies to deliver our Addressing Depopulation Action Plan.[16] This programme of activity is now into its third year and recently saw a funding expansion of nearly 50% to enable more local areas and regions to implement tailored activity to support local populations. This work, driven by partners' priorities, focuses on a range of areas including housing, childcare, skills, apprenticeships, talent attraction and more.

However, Scotland's demographic challenge cannot be addressed through these measures alone. In many communities, employers face recruitment difficulties not because jobs or training opportunities are absent, but because there are simply fewer people of working age available – a situation which reflects the structural legacy of Scotland's history of outmigration.[17]

12 Jones, C. (2022)

13 Scottish Government (2026a), Table 2.5 (Scotland Employment, Section A: Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing), Table 2.6 (GB Employment, Section A), and the overall Scotland and GB employment totals in the same tables

14 Scottish Government (2026c), Rural Scotland Data Dashboard

15 Migration Observatory (2026b), Does the UK require migrant workers to meet its housebuilding goals?

16 Scottish Government (2024)

17 National Records of Scotland (2026a), Figure 12: the number of people aged 16 to 64 years has decreased in most council areas since 2015

Attraction and retention

Migration already makes a significant contribution to Scotland's economy. People who move to Scotland fill vacancies, support businesses, pay taxes and spend money in local communities.

Research by the Diffley Partnership and 56 Degrees North found that 68% of Scottish businesses believe migration is vital to addressing critical skills shortages, while 76% support allowing sectors experiencing shortages to recruit workers from overseas.[18] Similarly, Migration Policy Scotland polling found that a clear majority of respondents viewed immigration as helping to fill jobs that are difficult to recruit for in Scotland and supported maintaining or increasing migration through key work and study routes.[19]

Analysis by the Migration Observatory found that the employment rate for working-age migrants was 77% in 2025, compared with 75% for the UK-born population.[20]

Migration also contributes to innovation, research and entrepreneurship. Scotland's universities and colleges provide a clear example. International students, researchers and academics strengthen global partnerships, enhance Scotland's international reputation and contribute significantly to local economies. Research commissioned by Universities UK International indicates that international students studying in Scotland during the 2021-22 academic year contributed almost £4.21 billion to the UK economy.[21]

Scotland also operates within an increasingly competitive international market for workers, students, researchers and entrepreneurs. Individuals deciding where to live, work or study consider a wide range of factors, including visa accessibility, opportunities for family members, prospects for settlement and whether a destination is welcoming and supportive.

Maintaining access to international talent is particularly important for sectors central to Scotland's future economic success, including renewable energy, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, digital technology and higher education.

Scotland's Migration Service provides information and support to Scottish employers, and to investors looking to recruit in Scotland, on accessing and navigating the UK immigration system.[22] It launched in 2024 and contracts are in place through March 2027. We will launch a procurement exercise in autumn of 2026 to maintain the service in the years ahead, and will continue to align interventions encouraging more people to move to Scotland with the needs of key target business growth sectors.

Impact of recent immigration system changes

Recent immigration policy changes have increasingly focused access to migration routes on higher salaries, graduate-level occupations and narrower definitions of economic contribution.[23]

The increase in the Skilled Worker salary threshold[24] to £41,700 in 2025 created challenges for employers in sectors and locations where wages are typically lower than the UK average, but recruitment needs remain acute. This is particularly relevant in rural and island communities, where employers often face persistent labour shortages despite offering competitive salaries within local labour markets.

18 Diffley Partnership, 56° North (2025)
19 Migration Policy Scotland (2026 – forthcoming)
20 Migration Observatory (2026c)
21 London Economics (2023)
22 Scotland's Migration Service
23 Migration Observatory (2026b)
24 UK Government (2026d)

While salary and qualification levels may be useful indicators in some circumstances, they do not capture the full range of contributions required to support Scotland's economy, public services and communities. Occupations essential to healthcare, social care, food and drink production and local service provision may struggle to meet national salary thresholds despite experiencing clear recruitment difficulties.[25, 26]

The Home Office's decision to replace the Immigration Salary List (ISL) with the Temporary Shortage List (TSL) from the end of 2026 further narrows access to visas for occupations below RQF Level 6. Eligibility is limited to roles supporting the UK Government's Industrial Strategy or deemed critical to national infrastructure.[27]

The Scottish Government is concerned that this approach does not adequately reflect Scotland's labour market and demographic circumstances. The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), who were commissioned by the Home Office to review the design of the TSL, has proposed a formal mechanism through which occupations could be reviewed for inclusion on the Temporary Shortage List outside the standard review cycle. Such a mechanism would be important in ensuring that genuine shortages can be addressed in a timely manner.

Similarly, given that the MAC was unable to recommend any roles for the full three-year period of TSL access, it is imperative that engagement with sectors, and support for the development of workforce plans and the associated evidence base, is strengthened ahead of the 'light touch' jobs plan review recommended to take place prior to the expiration of the existing 18-month access period.

The proposed design of the Temporary Shortage List also raises wider concerns. Restrictions on dependant family members, the temporary nature of the route and uncertainty around progression to settlement may reduce its attractiveness to prospective workers and make it harder for employers to recruit and retain staff. These conditions risk creating barriers not only for recruitment, but also for long-term retention.

Building lives in Scotland

Attracting people is only the first step in encouraging settlement in Scotland. Given that population growth is likely to be increasingly dependent on migration, retaining people and enabling them to settle and build long-term lives here is equally important.

Settlement provides certainty for individuals and families and enables people to participate in their communities, careers and futures.[28] It can be argued that the design of the current immigration system works against the interests of retention. Recent years have seen the cost of obtaining and maintaining immigration status increase significantly.[29] Visa application fees, repeat renewal costs, settlement fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge can create substantial financial burdens for individuals and families seeking to establish lives in Scotland for the long-term.

The design of immigration routes can also influence long-term outcomes. Where immigration status is tied closely to a single employer, workers may face barriers to changing jobs or pursuing career progression.[30] Family visa restrictions and financial requirements can create additional challenges for people considering whether to remain in the UK over the longer term.[31]

25 Food and Drink Federation (2026)
26 Scottish Social Services Council (2025)
27 Migration Advisory Committee (2026)
28 Migrant Integration Policy Index (2025)
29 House of Commons Library (2026)
30 Migration Observatory (2025)
31 Migration Advisory Committee (2025)

Earned settlement

The Home Office Earned Settlement proposals raise even more significant concerns about retention and settlement. Published in 2025, the proposals would make settlement increasingly conditional on factors such as income, employment and integration, while potentially extending the standard route to settlement from five years to ten years.[32]

The Scottish Government is concerned that these proposals would make settlement more complex, uncertain and difficult for many migrants and their families to achieve. A longer route to settlement would increase both uncertainty and cumulative costs for migrants and their families.[33] Evidence suggests that earlier access to permanent status supports integration, participation and long-term economic outcomes[34] and temporary status can contribute to lower wellbeing and increased stress.[35]

The Royal College of Nursing's survey on the proposed changes also highlighted retention concerns, with 60% of respondents who had not yet secured settlement indicating that a longer route to settlement would be very likely to affect their decision to remain in the UK.[36]

The Scottish Government has consistently argued that contribution should not be measured solely by income. People contribute through work, caring responsibilities, family life, volunteering, entrepreneurship and participation in communities. Some of the occupations most important to Scotland's economy and public services are not among the highest paid. A system that increasingly prioritises salary as a proxy for contribution risks undervaluing those wider benefits.

Navigating the immigration system

A fair immigration system must also be one that people can understand and use effectively.

The effectiveness of an immigration system depends not only on who is eligible, but on whether migrants, employers and institutions can successfully navigate the routes available to them. Frequent policy changes, multiple visa categories and increasingly complex requirements can create uncertainty and make long-term planning more difficult.

Research has found that whilst people using the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) reported a generally straightforward experience, those using other immigration routes were likely to encounter complexity and rely on external support to complete applications.[37] However, the requirement for third sector organisations to still provide direct support to individuals applying for settlement via the EUSS over five years since Brexit demonstrates that the operation of the scheme provides barriers to integration for people with complex circumstances, too.

Many migrants now require specialist advice simply to understand immigration requirements and processes. Further research has highlighted continuing pressures on immigration and asylum advice services, including high levels of demand and difficulties recruiting and retaining specialist advisers.[38]

32 Home Office (2025)
33 Migration Observatory (2026a)
34 Migration Observatory (2026a)
35 Jutvik, K. and Holmqvist, E. (2025)
36 Royal College of Nursing (2025)
37 Migration Observatory (2024)
38 Wilding, J (2025)

The increasing move towards digital immigration processes presents both opportunities and challenges. Users of eVisas are reportedly more likely to experience difficulties proving their status to employers, landlords and service providers. The research also highlighted challenges for some users, including older people, disabled people, those with lower levels of digital literacy and individuals with limited English-language proficiency.[39, 40]

Accessibility is therefore about more than the existence of immigration routes. Individuals and organisations must be able to understand requirements, access reliable information and have confidence that the system can be navigated successfully.

The cost of migration further affects accessibility. Migration Policy Scotland[41] and the Institute for Public Policy Research[42] have highlighted the impact of immigration-related costs on migrant households, while the Royal Society has found UK immigration costs to be substantially higher than those in many comparable countries.[43]

These burdens are also felt by employers, universities, colleges and public services. The Scottish Government's evaluation of Scotland's Migration Service found that many employers viewed the immigration system as complex and difficult to navigate, often relying on specialist advice to understand sponsorship requirements and maintain compliance.[44]

A fair immigration system should be accessible and proportionate for migrants, employers and institutions alike. It should assess people on the contribution they can make rather than their ability to absorb increasingly high costs or navigate unnecessary complexity.

Compliance and public confidence

The Scottish Government recognises that effective immigration controls are an essential part of a well-functioning immigration system. Public confidence depends on robust measures to address exploitation, trafficking, organised crime, fraud and deliberate abuse of immigration routes.

However, confidence is strengthened not only through enforcement, but through fairness, transparency and proportionality.

The Windrush scandal demonstrated the consequences of immigration policies that lose sight of those principles. The Windrush Lessons Learned Review[45] concluded that the failings were foreseeable and avoidable, highlighting the importance of accountability, scrutiny and understanding the impact of immigration decisions on people's lives.

The Scottish Government supports a proportionate approach to enforcement. There is a clear distinction between serious criminality and deliberate abuse of the immigration system, and situations involving administrative non-compliance, technical breaches, vulnerability, employer failings or difficulties navigating increasingly complex immigration rules.

Similarly, restrictions should be evidence-based and targeted at the specific problems they seek to address. The Migration Advisory Committee's review of the Graduate[46] route found no evidence of significant abuse and concluded that the route was operating broadly as intended.

39 Migration Observatory (2025b)
40 Ozkul, D. & Godin, M. (2025)
41 Migration Policy Scotland (2024)
42 IPPR, GMIAU, Praxis (2023)
43 Fragomen LLP (2025)
44 Scottish Government (2026b)
45 Williams, W (2020)
46 Migration Advisory Committee (2024)

By contrast, broader measures such as nationality-based visa restrictions in the form of so called 'visa brakes'[47] risk creating barriers for individuals seeking to use migration routes lawfully and in good faith.

Digital checks

Digital checks already play a role in supporting compliance with the immigration system. The introduction of digital right to work checks[48] by the UK Government demonstrates how digital status verification may have the potential to administer immigration permissions in a secure and proportionate way.

As immigration systems continue to evolve, the Scottish Government would welcome engagement with the Home Office on how digital identity and status verification could support future regionally tailored migration arrangements.

Given that existing immigration controls already rely on digital checks and verification processes to assess eligibility for a range of rights and entitlements, including conditions attached to immigration status, this suggests that the UK Government is confident that digital systems are capable of supporting compliance with differentiated immigration conditions and could therefore provide a practical means of administering any future Scotland-specific migration route.

Secure digital verification has the potential to reduce administrative burdens, improve compliance and simplify status checks, supporting the introduction of future Scotland-specific migration routes by providing a secure mechanism through which immigration permissions could be linked to residence and employment requirements in Scotland.

To address previously raised concerns about challenges associated with eVisas and digital immigration status, it would be vital for any such systems to be accessible by design, secure user privacy, and be supported by non-digital alternatives.

Conclusion

The Scottish Government supports an immigration system that is fair both to those who use it and to the people of Scotland.

For Scotland, migration is not solely a labour market issue. It is an important contributor to population sustainability, public services, economic growth and community resilience. A successful immigration system should therefore recognise the value of migration across a broad range of occupations and sectors, support people to build long-term lives in Scotland, remain accessible and affordable, and maintain public confidence through effective and proportionate controls.

Recent policy changes have increasingly focused on restricting access, increasing costs and narrowing routes to settlement. The Scottish Government's view is that a fair immigration system should instead seek to balance effective control with Scotland's demographic and economic needs, ensuring that migration policy supports sustainable communities, thriving public services and long-term prosperity. The next section of this paper outlines the Scottish Government's proposals for tailored migration system routes which promote these ambitions and will support demographic health and economic growth within Scotland.

47 UK Government (2026c)
48 UK Government (2025)

Delivering a Tailored Approach for Scotland

Scotland's demographic and economic circumstances require a different approach to migration policy. The evidence suggests that in a Scottish context, immigration policy should consider contributions to economic growth, public services and community sustainability, rather than focusing on reductions in net migration alone or set salary or skill thresholds.

The tailored migration proposals presented in this paper are representative of the fact that Scotland's requirements of the immigration system differ from the policy priorities currently pursued by the UK Government.

Whilst an independent Scotland or the full devolution of immigration powers, would allow the Scottish Government to devise its own immigration system, these tailored migration proposals have been developed to meet Scotland's specific needs whilst being deliverable within the existing UK immigration system.

Scottish Visa

The Scottish Government proposed a Scottish Visa, with a detailed evidence base and rationale for policy change, in the January 2020 publication 'Migration: Helping Scotland Prosper'.[49]

Overview

Countries including Canada and Australia have successfully used regional immigration schemes to allow states and provinces to attract and retain people with the skills and attributes needed to benefit specific local economies and communities. Learning from these international models has helped the Scottish Government to develop a tailored proposal for migration to address the distinct needs of Scotland, in the form of a 'Scottish Visa'.

The conditions of the Scottish Visa would allow migrants to enter the UK in order to live and work in Scotland. Holders of the visa would need to have a Scottish tax code as one condition.

A Scottish Visa would present an additional option for people who want to live, work and eventually settle in Scotland. The Scottish Visa would be an additional route within the UK immigration system, and the Scottish Government would work in partnership with the UK Government to deliver this visa route.

Delivery

The following models show some of the different ways a Scottish Visa could be delivered in practice, and the Scottish Government is ready to engage the Home Office on how to take these forward.

- Model 1. The UK Government creates an additional route for migration to Scotland, where the Home Office defines the criteria and rules, receives and assesses applications, and issues a visa to successful applicants.
- Model 2. The Scottish Government considers and proposes criteria for an additional route for migration to Scotland for the UK Government to establish, with the Home Office receiving and assessing applications, and issuing visas to successful applicants.
- Model 3. The Scottish Government defines the criteria for an additional route for migration to Scotland, receives and assesses applications, and then nominates successful applicants to the UK Government, where the Home Office receives and assesses the application at this second stage, and issues a visa to successful applicants.

49 Scottish Government (2020)

- Model 4. The Scottish Government has powers to establish additional routes for migration to Scotland and define eligibility criteria, it receives applications and assesses them, and then refers applications to the UK Government, where the Home Office will verify for identity and security only, before then issuing visas to successful applicants.

Visa sponsorship

Endorsement and sponsorship are established concepts in the UK immigration system, and nomination in this way would be similar to those processes, albeit the nominating body would be the Scottish Government rather than an employer. The proposed Scottish Visa would not have a sponsorship role for employers, removing a significant burden from the small and medium enterprises which make up a higher share of the economy in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

Residence in Scotland as a requirement

A condition for admittance on a Scottish Visa route should be residence in Scotland. Residence is already the basis of existing obligations and entitlements. For example, the Scottish tax code is based on residence, as is eligibility for many public services and benefits delivered by the Scottish Government and local government in Scotland.

The Scottish Government would consider carefully what compliance framework would need to be put in place to ensure proportionate, risk-based control for the requirement that holders of this visa stay in Scotland, including information and data- sharing arrangements with UK authorities; particularly Immigration Enforcement, but also other bodies such as HMRC, who are responsible for the Scottish tax code.

Employers are already required to undertake right to work checks to confirm an individual's immigration status and any conditions attached to their permission to work. Scotland-specific conditions could be clearly recorded as part of the individual's immigration status. This would provide an additional layer of assurance by, for example, enabling employers to verify that an individual is complying with any geographic conditions of their visa. Building on existing compliance and enforcement mechanisms offers a proportionate and practical approach to assurance within the current UK immigration system.

Salary threshold

There would be no salary threshold associated with this visa route, although earnings could be part of the selection process. This could encourage highly skilled people to take up quality jobs in Scotland but not exclude anyone solely on the basis of salary alone.

Length of stay and permanent settlement

The Scottish Government wants to ensure that there would be a clear and accessible pathway from a Scottish Visa to settlement. While the UK Government is currently consulting on proposals to move towards a more complex 'earned settlement' framework, including potentially extending standard settlement routes beyond the current five-year period, the Scottish Government has been clear in its opposition to proposals which lengthen routes to settlement or create additional barriers for people who wish to make their long-term home in Scotland.

Accordingly, the policy intention for a Scottish Visa would be to retain a route to settlement following five years of residence and compliance with visa conditions in Scotland. This reflects the Scottish Government's view that earlier access to settlement supports integration, community cohesion, economic participation and long-term population sustainability.

It is currently envisaged that a holder of a Scottish Visa would apply to the UK Government for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), although alternative arrangements recognising permanent residence in Scotland could be explored should these form part of an agreed approach between the Scottish and UK Governments.

To support this objective, the Scottish Visa could be issued for a period of five years and three months from the outset, providing applicants with a clear and straightforward route to settlement and allowing sufficient time for an ILR application to be made at the conclusion of the five-year qualifying period. This would remove the need for unnecessary interim applications and provide greater certainty for migrants, employers and communities.

Rural Visa

The Scottish Government proposed a Rural Visa pilot scheme, with a detailed evidence base and rationale for policy change, in September 2022.[50] This followed MAC support for the introduction of a Rural Visa pilot, and an indication from the Home Office to Parliament that they would consider a proposal. Details of the pilot were developed in partnership with the Scottish Government's Expert Advisory Group on Population and Migration, local authorities, and key industry and business sector partners.

Overview

The Scottish Government has repeatedly emphasised the urgency of the challenge for rural and island communities, with restricted immigration following the ending of free movement threatening the economic and social viability of many areas. Many of these areas are particularly dependent on migration, but very few job roles in rural and island geographies meet the required salary thresholds or other criteria to recruit through existing visa routes.

The over-arching and long-term goal of a Rural Visa would be to deliver improved outcomes at a community level in rural and island areas facing depopulation and/or skills shortages, by attracting migrants with the skills and profile that would best address the social and economic challenges created by population decline.

The Rural Visa would be a community-driven, employer-based migration route, operating within the UK immigration framework. The approach would spread the benefits of immigration to smaller rural and island communities in Scotland, enabling migration based on genuine employment opportunities that best meet the economic and service delivery needs of a community, whether to address acute shortages, support future growth and regeneration, or maintain crucial local services and community viability.

Delivery

Participating employers within identified geographic areas referred to as the 'community' would be able to advertise for vacancies (using bespoke entry criteria). Those employers would assess prospective candidates, before recommending chosen candidates to the Home Office for security checks and final decision. Once a decision was approved, the migrant would be sponsored by their employer.

Throughout the pre-arrival and arrival period, community partners (including the employer, local services and third sector bodies) would provide an integrated package of settlement support for newcomers.

Participating employers, in collaboration with Scottish Government and UK Government organisations, would have responsibility for ensuring that terms and conditions of the scheme continued to be met.

Users of the scheme would be required to adhere to clear conditions of employment within the community as set out across the duration of the pilot. These conditions would be gradually eased over a period of four years, with a route to permanent residency with no mobility restrictions upon completion.

50 Scottish Government (2022)

Locations

It is anticipated that decisions about the geographic size and boundaries of a participating 'community' would need to be taken in a shared forum between the UK Government, Scottish Government, MAC, and local authorities. However, this proposal makes an initial suggestion that participating 'community' areas could be drawn using Travel to Work Area (TTWA) geographic units to ensure appropriate size and configuration.

Whilst the Scottish Government have made the offer to pilot a Rural Visa, the route could be expanded to include rural areas facing demographic challenges across any of the four nations of the United Kingdom, and the Scottish Government would be willing to engage in any discussions around a shared pilot approach.

Scale

It is anticipated the scheme should establish between three and five pilot communities across rural and island areas of Scotland, trialled over an initial period of five years. This will enable comparisons between different areas during an ongoing evaluation of the pilot. Following the five-year period, a review could be undertaken to establish whether the pilot should be extended or be formalised into a wider programme.

Caps or quotas on migrants entering the scheme would need to be discussed during the design phase. However, for a pilot of the scheme, a working initial cap of 300 migrants per designated Community Pilot Area would be permitted to enter via the scheme across the pilot's duration.

Scottish Graduate Visa

The Scottish Government proposed a Scottish Graduate Visa in the January 2025 publication 'Migration – Meeting Scotland's Needs'.[51]

Overview

International students have a positive economic impact on Scotland. We want to attract and retain international students in Scotland. However, the restrictions on dependants and the significant increase in the salary threshold for the Skilled Worker Visa are significant disincentives to making this a realistic or attractive proposition for international students.

The planned reduction of the existing Graduate Visa route from 24 to 18 months from 2027 exacerbates the challenges facing international students in gaining a role which meets the salary threshold for a Skilled Worker Visa immediately following completion of their studies, especially students outside of London.

A Scottish Graduate Visa would act to ensure that international talent is not lost from Scotland due to the cliff-edge transition from the existing Graduate Visa to a Skilled Worker Visa. The conditions of the visa would ensure that users of the route live and work in Scotland, contributing to Scotland's economy and communities.

We propose the establishment of a Scottish Graduate Visa which would act as a bridge between the existing Graduate Visa and a Skilled Worker Visa, giving international students in Scotland an additional two years to develop their career to meet the salary threshold.

Delivery

To be eligible, individuals would need to have completed, and been awarded, a relevant qualification through a Scottish institution, such as a degree, Master's degree or PhD. They would need to currently be in the UK on a Graduate Visa, and intend to live and work in Scotland for the duration of their Scottish Graduate Visa.

51 Scottish Government (2025a)

As with the Scottish Visa, the Scottish Graduate Visa would be linked to a Scottish tax code and be based on a requirement to live and work in Scotland.

Eligibility criteria

Applicants for this visa route would be required to have:

- completed and been awarded a relevant qualification through an eligible Scottish institution, including a Higher National Diploma, UK recognised undergraduate degree, Master's degree or PhD;
- currently be in the UK on a Graduate visa;
- have lived in Scotland for "an appropriate period of time" whilst studying;
- intend to live in as well as seek and take employment in Scotland (including self-employment) – linked to a Scottish tax code.

What a successful applicant would be able to do:

- work in most jobs in Scotland (no salary requirement);
- be self-employed – to recognise and encourage entrepreneurship;
- live in Scotland with a partner and/or dependant children.

Duration

A Scottish Graduate Visa would be granted for up to two years. The Scottish Graduate Visa would provide a further opportunity for individuals to gain the professional experience required to qualify for roles on the Skilled Worker Visa route, as the current salary threshold for this visa route is a barrier to access for graduates in many locations and sectors. Whilst living and working in Scotland on the Scottish Graduate Visa, individuals would then be able to apply for other visas, such as a Skilled Worker Visa.

Possible visa pathway

- Individual applies for, and is awarded, a Student Visa.
- Following completion of their studies an individual is eligible to apply for a Graduate Visa. A Graduate Visa lasts for two years or three years for those with a PhD or other doctoral qualification. (NB: from 2027, the Home Office intend to reduce the length of the Graduate Visa from 2 years to 18 months).[52]
- an individual who applied for, and secured, a Graduate Visa could then apply for a Scottish Graduate Visa as a further step after their Graduate Visa
- a Scottish Graduate Visa would last for two years.

52 UK Government (2026a)

Scotland-specific provisions for existing visa routes

Overview

In our 2025 proposals to the Home Office, submitted during the development of the Immigration White Paper, we set out a series of proposed Scottish exemptions within existing visa routes.[53]

As with our broader proposal for the development and introduction of tailored migration routes for Scotland, the rationale for these exemptions reflects Scotland's distinct demographic and economic circumstances. Immigration policies designed primarily to address the needs of London and the South-East of England risk having a disproportionate impact on Scotland's economy, public services, and long-term population sustainability.

There is therefore a strong case for introducing targeted Scotland-specific exemptions within existing immigration routes.

A summary of the Scotland-specific provisions proposed in that paper is provided below.

- Student Visa Dependants. An exemption from restrictions on dependant visas for international students studying at Scottish higher education institutions, helping to support Scotland's universities and maintain their international competitiveness.
- Family Visa Financial Requirements. A Scotland-specific exemption or lower financial threshold for Family Visas, reducing barriers to family migration and supporting population growth, particularly in rural and island communities. This builds on views outlined in the Scottish Government response to the Migration Advisory Committee's call for evidence on family visa financial requirements.[54]
- Skilled Worker Visa Salary Thresholds. A lower salary threshold for Scotland within the Skilled Worker route, reflecting differences in earnings, labour market conditions and recruitment needs across Scotland.
- Care Workers. Previous versions of this proposal also included a Scottish exemption to dependant restrictions for care workers. However, following the closure of the overseas recruitment route for new care worker and senior care worker applications by the Home Office in July 2025, the Scottish Government considers that a Scottish-specific visa route, as set out elsewhere in this paper, would provide a more appropriate mechanism for addressing workforce challenges in the social care sector.

53 Scottish Government (2025b)
54 Scottish Government (2025c)

Maximising Opportunities within the Current System

Beyond our call for the introduction of tailored migration routes for Scotland to be introduced to the UK immigration system, and the measures already being taken to support the economic and demographic circumstances which a tailored migration system would support, the Scottish Government will also work to ensure that use of the existing immigration system is maximised for Scotland's benefit.

Scotland's Migration Service (SMS) helps individuals, employers and investors navigate the current UK immigration system to come to, stay in or recruit international talent to Scotland. We will make an additional investment in this Parliament to maintain SMS, while also looking at other opportunities to maximise the benefit of key immigration routes to Scotland's economy and communities.

Youth Mobility Schemes

Overview

The Scottish Government believes that existing Youth Mobility Schemes present an opportunity to attract more young people to live and work in Scotland, helping to address labour market needs, support communities and strengthen international connections.

Youth Mobility Schemes allow eligible young people, typically aged 18 to 30 or 35, from participating countries and territories to live and work in the UK for up to three years. Participants can work in most sectors and occupations, providing employers with access to a flexible workforce while offering young people valuable international experience.

These routes can also provide a foundation for longer-term migration through study, work or family pathways. As highlighted in evidence from the Migration Observatory, youth mobility can act as an important first step in building lasting social and economic connections with the UK.

Most Youth Mobility Scheme allocations are currently underused, meaning there is scope to increase participation without requiring changes to UK immigration policy. The Scottish Government therefore sees opportunities to make greater use of existing routes while also preparing for any future expansion of mobility arrangements, including a potential UK-EU youth mobility agreement.

Assessing opportunities

Our analysis suggests that the strongest opportunities are found where:

- there is a large eligible population;
- current participation rates are relatively low;
- significant unused allocations remain available; and
- practical barriers to mobility are limited.

Whilst there are barriers to increasing engagement with some Youth Mobility markets, initial analysis suggests that the existing Youth Mobility agreements that the UK holds with Australia and Canada represent a significant opportunity for increased uptake.

Next steps

The Scottish Government will continue to explore how existing migration routes can better support Scotland's economic and demographic needs. This includes considering how Scotland can be promoted more effectively to young people in priority markets, particularly Australia and Canada, where the potential for growth appears strongest.

The UK could learn from the Australian system of working holiday visas, where young people are eligible to extend their stay in Australia if they live in a particular region, such as a rural area, or work in a particular occupation. Therefore, the UK Government should work with the Scottish Government to develop a pilot scheme to allow individuals in the UK on a Youth Mobility visa to extend their stay for up to an additional year if they reside in Scotland during that time. This would be an early opportunity to test a residence requirement as a visa condition in a low-risk context.

Alongside better use of existing schemes, the Scottish Government remains supportive of efforts to expand opportunities for international youth mobility. Should wider agreements, including a potential UK-EU youth mobility arrangement, be reached in future, the Scottish Government will work to ensure that Scotland is positioned to attract and retain talented young people who can contribute to our economy, communities and society.

Displaced talent

Overview

Building on previous successful work to match skilled displaced persons with employers in Scotland, the Scottish Government will play an active role in maximising the opportunities provided by the new 'safe and legal' routes currently being developed by the Home Office to facilitate sponsored work and study routes for international displaced persons to live, study, and work in the UK.[55]

Next steps

We will engage closely with the UK Government as further policy development occurs, highlighting the mutually beneficial opportunity that the use of these sponsored pathways could have in meeting Scotland's migration objectives if aligned with existing proposals such as the Rural Visa.

Temporary Shortage List

Overview

As discussed earlier in this paper, the UK Government's 2025 Immigration White Paper proposed replacing the Immigration Salary List (ISL) with a new Temporary Shortage List (TSL) as part of wider policy changes that restrict the Skilled Worker route to occupations at RQF Level 6 and above.

The TSL is intended to provide temporary access to visas for a limited number of occupations below degree level where they support the UK Government's Industrial Strategy or critical national infrastructure. Its narrower scope may create challenges for parts of Scotland's economy unless there is a mechanism to add occupations quickly where clear evidence of shortages exists. The MAC's Stage 1 report recommended a formal process allowing occupations to be reviewed outside the standard three-year review cycle.

The Scottish Government is also concerned that aspects of the proposed TSL may reduce its attractiveness to prospective workers. These include restrictions on dependant family members, the temporary nature of the route, and uncertainty around whether time spent on a TSL visa will count towards settlement. Together, these factors may make it more difficult for employers to attract and retain specialist workers.

55 UK Government (2026b)

Next steps

The Home Office has yet to respond to the MAC's recommendations on the TSL, although a response is expected ahead of the planned closure of the Immigration Salary List on 31 December 2026.

The Scottish Government will continue to press for:

- a formal mechanism to add occupations to the TSL where evidence of shortages emerges;
- dependant family members to be permitted on the route; and
- time spent on a TSL visa to count towards settlement.

We will also work with stakeholders to maximise the effectiveness of the route for sectors that continue to rely on access to specialist international talent, while advocating for reforms that improve the route's attractiveness and help employers address critical skills shortages.

Conclusion

The new UK Government has made clear that it is committed to exploring the opportunities that devolution of powers away from Westminster can bring to the rest of the UK. This paper outlines the benefits that a devolved or regionally tailored approach to immigration policy can have in supporting Scotland's communities in the face of projected population decline whilst also supporting economic growth. An immigration system which is more responsive to the needs of local communities and of job roles across all levels and sectors of the economy will help promote economic growth and sustainable working age populations across Scotland.

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The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80775-468-6 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, August 2026

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1772586 (08/26)