

A healthier, fairer and more productive Scotland

Faculty of Public Health in Scotland

Call to Action for the 2026
Scottish Parliamentary election



FACULTY OF
PUBLIC HEALTH

Introduction

We are calling for Scottish political parties to set out plans to create a healthier, fairer and more productive Scotland ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliamentary election.

The Faculty of Public Health (FPH) shares a vision for a healthier, fairer and more productive UK where everyone has a fair chance to live a long, fulfilling and healthy life.¹ This recognises good public health as the foundation for increasing economic productivity, ensuring our health and care services are sustainable, and maximising the potential of our children. This Call to Action from the Committee of the FPH in Scotland sets out key policies we believe that the new government should introduce in the next Parliament to achieve this vision in Scotland.

Everyone has the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.² Yet this fundamental human right is not being realised for everyone in Scotland. Scotland's people have poorer health and die younger than other Western European nations.³ Health has worsened and inequalities deepened over the past decade.⁴ These reflect the impacts of austerity and rising social and economic inequalities.^{5 6 7}

Our health is shaped by the circumstances in which we live, work and grow up.⁸ To enable everyone to thrive we must provide the building blocks of good health⁹ for all including:

- a decent income
- education
- healthy working conditions
- healthy homes
- good sustainable transport
- natural spaces
- a healthy built environment
- opportunities for social interaction
- access to health-promoting goods and services.

We must also protect people from hazards, including the adverse effects of climate change,¹⁰ and from unhealthy products.¹¹ To reduce the steep inequalities in health and life expectancy between Scottish communities, we must reduce the social and economic inequalities that are the underlying cause of health inequalities¹² and combat the impact of austerity.

Change is possible – the Scottish Parliament has the power to reverse Scotland's declining health.¹³ We call on the Scottish Parliament to enact an ambitious programme for change to improve health and wellbeing for all, reduce social and health inequalities and protect environmental sustainability.

This call is for parliamentary candidates of all political parties and Members of the next Scottish Parliament and the next Scottish Government. We are calling for the following action:

1. Ensure health in all policies.
2. Create a wellbeing economy.
3. Promote the best possible start to life for all.
4. Improve our places and communities
5. Safeguard our climate and environment.
6. Tackle the commercial determinants of health.
7. Shift resources toward prevention.

Calls to action

1. Ensure health in all policies

Policies and plans in all sectors can affect the building blocks of good health and can either reinforce or reduce the social and economic inequalities that cause health inequalities.¹⁴ They can also impact on climate resilience and environmental sustainability with implications for health and wellbeing of future generations.¹⁵ A health in all policies approach aims to identify these wider impacts and take action to prevent unintended harms and realise positive synergies from all policies and plans.¹⁶

We call on you to:

■ **Place a statutory duty on all public organisations to ensure their policies, plans and actions enhance health, health equity and environmental sustainability, now and for future generations.**

2. Create a wellbeing economy

The economy has a powerful influence on health, but currently the Scottish economy is not achieving best outcomes for all its people. The economy can support wellbeing, but this needs prosperity to be shared.¹⁷ Poverty damages health, by affecting people's ability to access other building blocks of health.¹⁸ Although GDP per head has grown over the past 20 years¹⁹ the benefits have not been shared equally. Over a fifth of working age adults are in poverty and almost a quarter of children in Scotland are now growing up in poverty.²⁰ This will have long-lasting impacts on their educational, employment and health outcomes.²¹

Scotland has steep inequalities of income and wealth, with just 2% of households holding 18% of the wealth in Scotland.²² Income and wealth inequalities are fundamental causes of health inequalities.²³ Economic activity can also cause harms if it produces goods that are bad for health, causes environmental damage or employs people on low pay or poor working conditions.²⁴

These harms are not inevitable. We can create a wellbeing economy that shares benefits more equally and is designed to serve people and planet, rather than striving for economic growth at all costs.²⁵ Community Wealth Building is an approach to economic development that can help progress to a wellbeing economy by sharing wealth more equally, with positive impacts on health and health inequalities.²⁶ Alongside sustained commitment to community wealth building, other policies are needed to reduce the current unacceptable levels of economic and social inequality in Scotland.²⁷

Survey data and deliberative research shows that the Scottish public supports a shift to a wellbeing economy and redistribution of income and wealth.^{28 29}

We call on you to:

- **Introduce mechanisms to ensure economic policies serve the needs of people and planet.**
- **Use available mechanisms within SG powers to ensure all adults and children have income at least equivalent to the minimum income for healthy living.**
- **Set targets to reduce income and wealth inequalities and develop and implement actions to achieve these.**
- **Implement the recommendations of the independent report on Increasing The Role Of Inclusive And Democratic Business Models.³⁰**

3. Promote the best possible start to life for all

Early years are of crucial importance to individuals' lives. Pregnancy and childhood are critical and foundational periods for health, with particular opportunities to reduce inequalities now and into adult life and older age. Investment at this life stage therefore has a high return on investment.^{31 32} As a society we should promote the best possible start to life for all and minimise adversity in childhood.³³ We should also recognise that children do not exist in isolation, but are integral to families, households and communities – they are the foundation of society.

It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. However, in 21st Century Scotland it takes a global economy, presenting both benefits and harms to health.

We call on you to:

- **Fund the delivery of high-quality childcare for all children over 2 years, proportionately according to need.**
- **Develop universal, community-based children and family centres, based on the SureStart model, accessible to all children and families, especially in areas of higher social deprivation.**

4. Improve our places and communities

'Place' is where we live, where we learn and play, where we socialise and where we work. It encompasses both the physical environment (the buildings, streets, public areas and natural spaces that make up neighbourhoods) and the social environment (the relationships, social contact and support networks that exist in a community). Place has an important role to play in our health and wellbeing and in tackling health inequalities. It can have positive or negative impacts on our mental and physical wellbeing.³⁴

The quality, affordability and energy efficiency of the homes we live in have important implications for health. Everyone in Scotland should have the right to a safe, warm, dry and affordable home to live in. Yet homelessness applications continue to rise, to over 40,000 in 2023/24,³⁵ and several councils have declared a housing emergency.

Scotland can obtain significant benefits to the overall health and wellbeing of its population by continuing to develop the spaces we live in and interact with every day. By safeguarding our green and blue spaces and by considering how people are linked together we can

develop communities that are more robust to future challenges and allow fuller and fairer opportunities for all.

We call on you to:

- **Increase targets for the provision of affordable homes and prioritise investment to achieve these and provide homes that are high quality, energy efficient and in well-connected places with good community facilities.**
- **Increase availability of accessible, high quality and safe public outdoor spaces for play, that meets the needs of parents, carers and their children and that takes account of the housing types within the vicinity.**

5. Protect our climate and environment

Action to improve environmental sustainability presents a significant opportunity to improve population health and reduce health inequalities. Changes in the relationships within ecosystems can have large and far-reaching impacts to human health. The safeguarding and promotion of green spaces have significant potential for climate change mitigation and adaptation as well as enhancing quality of life.

The climate emergency poses an existential threat to health in Scotland and elsewhere.³⁶ It is essential to reduce carbon emissions and take action to adapt to changes in our climate. We also need actions to ensure a just transition to a low carbon future that meets the needs of everyone especially those most at risk of poor health.³⁷ The effects of climate change and the steps we take to address it can also be socially patterned as they affect the wider determinants of health such as housing and jobs. We therefore need to prioritise the needs of those most vulnerable to avoid widening health inequalities.³⁸ As well as learning to live with climate change, we need to decarbonise our economy in a way that does not disadvantage groups or increase inequity.

Air pollution is a significant risk to the population and can affect health throughout the life-course. It has been estimated that in the UK the cost of air pollution equates to 28,000 to 36,000 deaths per year.³⁹ There can be clear synergies between strategies to address climate change and air pollution.

Access to transport plays a vital role in maintaining health and wellbeing in Scotland. It provides links to opportunities such as work and education; leisure and friends; access to services and to better-quality nutrition. Available, reliable, affordable, accessible and safe travel options are therefore a key part of maintaining protective wider determinants of health.⁴⁰ Private car use causes multiple harms to health through collisions, air pollution, severance, loss of public space and physical inactivity.⁴¹ Investing in active and public transport modes can bring a triple win for health, equity and sustainability.

We call on you to:

- **Develop a strategic approach to reduce transport poverty by addressing the availability, reliability, affordability, accessibility and safety of sustainable transport options.**
- **Introduce a moratorium on car-dependent forms of development such as 'drive-through' services.**
- **Maintain and strengthen commitment to end dependency on fossil fuels and take actions to ensure the transition maximises co-benefits for health, avoids health risks and reduces economic, social and health inequalities including for low-income economies.**
- **Safeguard, enhance and increase biodiverse natural spaces, focusing on increasing the availability, quality, and accessibility of multifunctional natural spaces in deprived urban areas where existing inequalities exist, and the greatest health and equity could be realised.**

6. Tackle the commercial determinants of health

Non-communicable diseases remain Scotland's leading cause of death and ill-health. In 2023 they accounted for some 52,000 deaths, 85% of all recorded deaths that year.⁴² One in five of those NCD deaths were preventable and caused by commercial products like tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink.⁴³ Tackling Scotland's health inequalities requires working upstream, taking on the corporate interests and their health-harming products, which are commercially driven determinants of health.

This requires a policy environment that recognises and attends to the impacts of commercial determinants of health; ensures application of good governance, regulates products and holds corporate interests accountable, ensures health-promoting public spaces and events, and prioritises the health and quality of life of people living and growing up in Scotland over the profits of health harming industries. Deliberative research shows that the Scottish public supports bold action in this area.⁴⁴

We call on you to:

- **Implement an NCD prevention strategy that includes progressing the actions in the NCD Alliance 10-Year Vision for a Healthier Scotland⁴⁵ and expand the approach to other health harming commodities.**
- **Embed robust conflict of interest policies regarding health-harming industries at all levels of national and local government.**
- **Ensure large events such as the 2026 Commonwealth Games support healthy environments and avoid promoting health harming commodities.**

7. Shift resources toward prevention

Health inequalities remain deeply entrenched in Scotland, with preventable illnesses accounting for a significant burden on the healthcare system. Research indicates that much of the ill health experienced in the population could be prevented through early interventions and sustained support.⁴⁶ Shifting resources toward prevention could not only improve health outcomes but also reduce the strain on the NHS, allowing it to focus resources on those who need care the most.⁴⁷ Investing in prevention early in life, particularly during childhood, yields substantial long-term health benefits and reduces the overall demand for healthcare services.⁴⁸ Services that promote good health in childhood—such as antenatal care, universal health visiting services, immunisations, and dental care—are essential in preventing a wide range of physical and mental health issues later in life.

The voluntary and community sector plays a crucial role in supporting preventive health services. These organisations often have deeper ties to local communities and can deliver tailored, accessible services that complement statutory services.⁴⁹ Ensuring adequate and proportionate funding for both statutory and community-based services will be key to addressing the broader determinants of health, including mental health, housing, and social support, that have a direct impact on individuals' overall well-being.

We call on you to:

- Increase the proportion of NHS spend on prevention of ill health and define priority preventive services to be provided, including those provided by voluntary and community sector partners.
- Ensure adequate and proportionate funding to services which promote good health and prevent illness in childhood, including antenatal care, universal health visiting service, immunisations and dental care.

The public is counting on you

As a politician, you are part of the wider public health workforce.⁵⁰ You play a crucial role in shaping public health policies, advocating for health initiatives, and allocating resources to improve population health.

Your decisions can significantly impact on the health and wellbeing of the population.

The Scottish public is counting on you to create a healthier, fairer and more productive Scotland.

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