

A RIGHT, A SPACE, A FUTURE:

2026 SCOTTISH ELECTION MANIFESTO REPORT



#RightSpaceFuture

Introduction

The 2026 Scottish Parliament election has come at an important moment for young people and the communities that support them. Scotland continues to face challenges around poverty, mental health, educational engagement, community safety, employability and inequality, while many services that help young people succeed remain under pressure.

Against that backdrop, party manifestos provide an important insight into how each political party would seek to improve outcomes for young people over the next parliamentary term. Across the political spectrum there is increasing recognition of the value of prevention, early support, opportunity, wellbeing and participation.

This report brings together those party commitments relevant to young people, youth work and related policy areas. It provides an overview of where parties are placing emphasis, where common ground exists, and where future opportunities may emerge.

Taken together, these commitments show that investing in young people is increasingly seen not only as a social priority, but as central to Scotland's long-term success.

Election result and parliamentary balance

The 2026 Scottish Parliament election resulted in the SNP remaining the largest party at Holyrood, although short of an overall majority. The election also produced a more fragmented parliamentary landscape, with representation spread across six parties.

The final seat totals were:

- ➔ **Scottish National Party (SNP): 58 seats**
- ➔ **Scottish Labour: 17 seats**
- ➔ **Reform UK: 17 seats**
- ➔ **Scottish Greens: 15 seats**
- ➔ **Scottish Conservatives: 12 seats**
- ➔ **Scottish Liberal Democrats: 10 seats**

No party secured the 65 seats required for an outright majority, meaning cross-party cooperation and negotiation are likely to play an important role during the new parliamentary session.

The election saw increased representation for smaller parties, including Reform UK securing their first representation in the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Greens winning constituency seats for the first time.

For the youth work sector, the results mean there is support for youth work across a number of political parties for themes linked to prevention, young people's wellbeing, employability, mental health, education engagement and community support. This creates opportunities to build cross-party backing for investment, reform and stronger national commitments for young people and youth work during the next Parliament.

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY



The Scottish National Party's manifesto sets out priorities for the next Parliament across public services, poverty, communities and the economy.

While the manifesto does not explicitly reference youth work, it contains a number of commitments that align closely with the role youth work already plays in supporting young people and communities across Scotland.

→ Support for the third sector

The manifesto recognises the importance of Scotland's third sector and commits to multi-year funding to allow better planning and more sustainable delivery.

→ Enterprise and opportunity

Through the First Minister's Start-Up Challenge, the SNP proposes support for young people from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds to start and grow businesses through mentoring, tailored support and grants.

A new Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant would support more young people into apprenticeships, alongside a bespoke scheme to help disabled young people access apprenticeships and employment. The manifesto also includes support worth up to £10,000 to help more young people buy their first home.



Sport, participation and wellbeing

A new Sports Taster Fund, backed by £5 million, would help children and young people across Scotland try new sports.

The manifesto also commits to continued funding for school counselling, expanded one-to-one support, and a new Children and Young People's Crisis Framework and Crisis Intervention Fund. It also proposes extending the £2 bus fare cap nationwide.



Education and digital wellbeing

Plans include curriculum reform, phone-free classrooms and a public health campaign on healthy and safe use of social media and online activity.



Prevention and community safety

The SNP commits to continued rollout of Bairns' Hoose and a new Social Impact Investment approach supporting preventative justice programmes, safe spaces for young people and diversion from antisocial behaviour and crime.



Scottish Labour's manifesto, sets out proposals for public services, the economy and communities.

Within this, there is recognition of the role youth work plays in supporting young people and preventing harm.

Specific proposals on youth work reflect a growing understanding across political parties of the sector's contribution.

Commitments include:

- Restore the Cashback for Communities Youth Work Fund, with £1 million for local youth work and crime prevention.
- Develop a new preventative model for youth work, focused on early engagement and supporting young people to make positive choices.

These commitments build on earlier work undertaken by former Labour MSP Martin Whitfield, who brought forward a Youth Work Bill following significant consultation and engagement with the sector.

→ Prevention and safer communities

The manifesto places a wider emphasis on prevention, tackling inequality and supporting communities through earlier intervention.

Scottish Labour's focus on prevention and community support aligns with the role youth work already plays in helping young people build confidence, resilience and positive pathways.



Opportunity and support

The manifesto also highlights wider commitments linked to education, employability and reducing inequality.

Its proposals reflect increasing recognition across political parties that investment in young people, communities and preventative services can help improve outcomes while reducing long-term pressure on public services.



Reform UK's Scottish manifesto for the 2026 election sets out a programme focused on the economy, public services, education, housing and justice. While the manifesto contains limited direct reference to youth work, it includes proposals linked to employability, education, community safety and opportunities for young people.

→ **Jobs, skills and pathways**

Reform UK proposes a First Job Passport to help every young person move from school into further education, apprenticeship, vocational training or employment.

It also proposes a Youth Entrepreneur Scheme combining business education, work experience and mentorship with local businesses.

The manifesto includes wider proposals focused on skills and economic growth, including reforms to apprenticeship funding and training linked to key sectors of the economy.

→ **Education**

The manifesto includes proposals on schools and education reform, including changes to the Curriculum for Excellence, restoring exams as the main form of assessment, banning mobile phones in classrooms and giving more control to headteachers.

It also places emphasis on improving pathways into employment and increasing opportunities for young people through economic growth and training.



Housing and affordability

Reform UK proposes a Rent-To-Buy model targeted at young people, first-time buyers and working families, alongside wider plans to increase affordable housing supply.

The manifesto also references community cohesion, local services and policing as part of a wider approach to supporting communities and reducing pressures facing families and young people.



The Scottish Greens' 2026 manifesto includes direct proposals on youth work, including improving access, delivering a new National Youth Work Strategy, and linking youth work more closely with education and mental health support.

It also positions youth work as part of a preventative approach to justice.

The manifesto states that the Scottish Greens would:

- Support access to youth work, to support and empower young people and improve their wellbeing and life chances.
- Deliver an updated National Youth Work Strategy.
- Integrate funded youth work opportunities within secondary education.
- Include youth work with local and national mental health support and referral system.

It also says:

"The Scottish Greens will place prevention, de-escalation, youth work, and trauma-informed practice at the heart of our approach to justice."

These proposals reflect the role youth work plays in informal learning, early support and helping young people navigate challenges.

Mental health and wellbeing

The manifesto places significant emphasis on mental health, wellbeing and prevention, including proposals to strengthen links between youth work, schools and mental health services.

The Greens also position youth work as part of a wider preventative model that supports young people before crisis point and strengthens local communities

Education and participation

The manifesto highlights the importance of informal education, participation and creating more opportunities for young people to access support within schools and communities.

There is also a focus on inclusion, empowerment and ensuring young people have access to trusted adults, safe spaces and community-based support.

SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVE & UNIONIST PARTY



Alongside its wider platform, the Scottish Conservative manifesto includes recognition of the role youth work, community organisations and local services play in supporting young people and communities. The manifesto places a strong emphasis on employability, skills, education, safer communities and economic opportunity.

The manifesto commits to:

- Supporting youth groups through free access to public buildings.
- Ensuring fair local agreements for the use of public infrastructure.
- Publishing a new National Youth Work Strategy.

These commitments reflect priorities long raised by the sector, particularly around access to spaces and the need for a clear national framework.

→ Education, skills and opportunity

The manifesto includes a strong focus on raising school standards, improving employability and creating more opportunities for young people through economic growth and training.

Proposals include a major 'Jobs for Life' programme designed to help adults and young people gain future-proof skills linked to the jobs the economy will require in the future. It also includes commitments around AI, economic regeneration, employability support and attracting investment into communities.



Communities and prevention

The manifesto also includes commitments around community safety, policing and prevention, alongside wider proposals to strengthen local services and community infrastructure.

The Scottish Conservatives also highlight the importance of improving local accountability and supporting communities through economic regeneration and stronger local decision-making.



The Scottish Liberal Democrats have published their 2026 manifesto, *Change with Fairness at its Heart*, containing a number of commitments relevant to young people and youth work.

Youth Work Bill and entitlement

The standout commitment is a proposal to bring forward a Youth Work Bill. The manifesto says this would focus on:

- Boosting young people's educational, social and emotional development.
- Ensuring everyone has access to services that help them feel included and build life skills, resilience and confidence.
- Directing young people towards services at key points in their lives.
- Introducing an entitlement to youth work for 11–25-year-olds.
- Introducing national and local youth work strategies.

This reflects long-standing calls for youth work to be recognised as an essential service, available to all young people and backed by clear planning.



Inclusion and wellbeing

The manifesto places emphasis on inclusion, wellbeing and ensuring young people can access support at important points in their lives.

The proposed entitlement to youth work represents one of the clearest commitments across the political parties to universal access to youth work services and support.



Education and life skills

The Liberal Democrats also position youth work as supporting educational engagement, emotional wellbeing, resilience and life skills.

The manifesto reflects the growing recognition that informal learning and trusted relationships play an important role alongside formal education and public services.

Next steps

Taken together, these manifesto commitments show that youth work and wider support for young people are increasingly part of mainstream political debate in Scotland.

While the depth of commitment varies between parties, recurring themes are clear: prevention, employability, mental health, education engagement, safer communities and access to opportunity.

For the youth work sector, the next Parliament presents a major opportunity to turn manifesto commitments into sustained action, investment and long-term reform for young people across Scotland.

The strength of backing for youth work across political parties should now be used to lever additional funding, stronger national commitments and practical change that expands access in every community.

Cross-party support creates a valuable platform from which to secure the investment and policy progress needed to help our young people thrive.

You can read about the manifesto commitments from each party here:

<https://www.youthlink.scot/policy-influence/public-affairs/youth-work-manifesto-2026/>