Scottish Community Alliance Response

Draft Infrastructure Strategy 2027-2037

Role of the Infrastructure Strategy

1. **Do you agree with the scope and role of the Infrastructure Strategy?**

   We broadly welcome the ambition to create a long term Infrastructure Strategy for Scotland. The proposed scope, covering economic, social and natural infrastructure is appropriate and reflects the interconnected nature of the challenges facing communities. However, we believe the Strategy underestimates the central role that communities themselves must play in shaping, delivering and stewarding infrastructure over the next decade. Communities deliver essential infrastructure, yet their role is not reflected clearly in the strategy's definitions or framing.

   We would recommend stronger alignment with the Democracy Matters work being undertaken as part of the Public Sector Reform Agenda - Democracy Matters: route map to reform - gov.scot. This sets out proposals for empowered community decision making and the work needed to deliver it.

   Communities, community organisations and intermediary bodies require equal recognition to ensure priorities and contributions are reflected in future investment decisions. The Strategy will only succeed if it embeds community ownership, community wealth building and local decision making as core principles rather than optional considerations.

   While we welcome the Strategy's recognition of rural and island communities, we do not believe it yet fully reflects the specific infrastructure requirements of Scotland's islands. Infrastructure in island areas is fundamentally shaped by remoteness, small and dispersed populations, exposure to climate impacts and reliance on a limited number of connections to the mainland and between islands. As a result, island infrastructure should not be treated as a subset of rural provision, but as a distinct and strategic priority within the overall framework.

   In particular, the Strategy should give greater emphasis to lifeline transport infrastructure. Ferry services, terminals, harbours, piers and inter-island connections are not simply transport assets, they are essential infrastructure that underpins access to employment, healthcare, education, supply chains and population sustainability. Similarly, regional air services and associated airport infrastructure play a critical role in maintaining connectivity and resilience between islands and with Mainland Scotland and beyond. Investment decisions must recognise the economic and social value of these

assets, rather than relying solely on conventional measures of demand or utilisation.
Digital connectivity is another critical area where island needs require stronger recognition. Reliable, high quality broadband and mobile coverage are essential for service delivery, remote working, education, business development and population retention. This includes not only last-mile connectivity but also the resilience and capacity of backhaul infrastructure and subsea connections, where single points of failure can have disproportionate impacts on island communities and where we have seen very recent issues in Orkney and Tiree.

Energy and utilities infrastructure also require a more explicit island focus. Grid capacity, transmission infrastructure and subsea electricity cables are fundamental to enabling renewable energy development in island areas and ensuring local communities benefit from that transition. There are a number of island communities that have constrained access to the national grid, limiting potential for renewable infrastructure and decarbonisation activities, as well as community resilience. At the same time, water and wastewater infrastructure can present significant constraints on housing delivery and economic growth, and must be considered as enabling infrastructure within a place-based approach.

Housing should be recognised as a critical enabling component of island infrastructure systems, rather than solely a cross-cutting priority. In many island communities, the availability of suitable housing is directly linked to the sustainability of local services, the ability to attract and retain a workforce, and the delivery of wider infrastructure investment. This is also true for very remote rural areas as well. A more integrated approach is required, ensuring that housing, transport, digital and economic infrastructure are planned and delivered together, but at the same time, small remote islands and communities must not be forgotten if they cannot be linked to wider roll outs.
Finally, the Strategy should place greater emphasis on resilience and climate adaptation in island contexts. Island infrastructure is particularly exposed to the impacts of severe weather, coastal erosion and sea level rise. This requires targeted investment in coastal protection, resilient design, redundancy in key networks and emergency response capacity. Strengthening resilience is not optional in island areas, it is fundamental to maintaining safe, functioning communities, however, it is understood that there are limits on what can be done in terms of investment, so it is vital that engagement with communities on all of the above issues are undertaken and that decisions are not made centrally or even in what might be considered 'local' public sector bodies and councils. Communities must be involved in discussions and decisions, even if those discussions are not easy to have.

To support this, independent Island Communities Impact Assessments should be used not only as a procedural requirement but as a tool to shape investment priorities and ensure that the distinct needs of island communities are systematically reflected in infrastructure planning and delivery.

2. **Do you think the proposed framework, linking the 30-year Needs Assessment, 10-year Infrastructure Strategy, Spending Reviews and annual Budgets will support improved strategic planning and delivery? Are there any further improvements you want to suggest?**

   We agree that aligning the 30 year Needs Assessment, 10 year Infrastructure Strategy, Spending Reviews and annual Budgets has the potential to improve long-term planning and investment stability. A clearer line of sight between strategic intent and annual decision making is welcome.

   However, the framework will only be effective if it fully reflects the reality of Scotland's infrastructure landscape. At present, it does not adequately recognise the role of community owned and community infrastructure, which delivers essential social, economic and natural infrastructure outcomes in many places. Without explicit inclusion of community organisations as infrastructure partners, the framework risks reinforcing a narrow, top down view of infrastructure planning.

   To strengthen the framework, we recommend:

   - Explicit recognition of community owned assets within the Needs Assessment and Strategy, ensuring they are considered in long term planning and capital allocation.
   - A formal role for community decision making body in regional and national infrastructure planning processes, ensuring decisions are genuinely place-based.
   - Greater transparency in how the Strategy will influence future capital investment, so that community organisations can plan with confidence and align their own long term asset strategies.

   With these improvements, the framework would better support strategic planning, local resilience and the delivery of national outcomes across Scotland.

Infrastructure Governance Principles

3. **Do any elements of the infrastructure lifecycle need to be strengthened to promote more effective infrastructure planning and delivery?**

   Yes. Several stages of the infrastructure lifecycle need strengthening, particularly in how they recognise and integrate community owned and community infrastructure.

   - Early stage planning and needs assessment should formally include a community decision making body and community organisations, who are often first to identify local needs and repurpose under used assets.
   - Asset review and repurposing should acknowledge the significant role communities play in acquiring, managing and stewarding land, buildings and natural assets.
   - Delivery and long term stewardship must reflect the proven contribution of community ownership in sustaining local services.

For the lifecycle to function effectively, community organisations must be included at every stage, from needs assessment to delivery, ensuring local capacity and solutions shape national infrastructure investment.

4. **In what areas could changes to governance or planning processes across the public sector improve the impact of the investment hierarchy?**

   Governance and planning processes need to become more place based and more inclusive of community infrastructure if the investment hierarchy is to have real impact.

   Public bodies should be required to work with a community decision making body and community organisations at the earliest stages of planning, particularly when assessing options to maintain, repurpose or dispose of assets. Community ownership should be recognised as a mainstream route for long term stewardship, not an afterthought.

   Greater consistency is also needed across public bodies. National guidance should ensure that community options are considered alongside public and private alternatives and that collaboration explicitly includes our communities. Strengthening transparency around how the hierarchy is applied would help drive this behaviour change.

Infrastructure Themes and Enablers

5. **Do you agree that enabling net zero and environmental sustainability, driving economic growth, and building resilient places continue to be the right outcomes to guide infrastructure investment over the next decade?**

   Yes, we agree that enabling net zero, supporting environmental sustainability, driving economic growth and building resilient places remain the right outcomes to guide infrastructure investment over the next decade.

   Community organisations are already central to net zero delivery through community energy, active travel initiatives, local retrofit programmes and stewardship of natural assets. They also drive inclusive economic growth by retaining wealth locally and creating long term, place based employment. In many areas, community organisations are the backbone of local resilience, providing essential services, emergency response capacity and long term stewardship of land and buildings.

   To fully realise these outcomes, the Strategy must ensure that community owned infrastructure is recognised as a core contributor across all three areas and that investment decisions support locally led solutions that strengthen resilience, reduce emissions and build community wealth.

6. **Are the three proposed enablers, public assets, place-making and private investment, sufficient to deliver the Strategy's outcomes? Are there other enablers we should consider instead/additionally?**

   The three proposed enablers, public assets, place-making and private investment, are important but they are not sufficient**.** A critical enabler of community is missing.

   Community organisations already deliver essential economic, social and natural infrastructure outcomes, yet they are not recognised as a distinct enabler. Without this, the Strategy risks overlooking one of the most effective routes to net zero, resilient places and inclusive local growth.

   A fourth enabler should therefore be added: Community ownership and community led delivery, supported by investment in community capacity. This would align the Strategy with community wealth building, land reform and public service reform and ensure that locally led solutions are fully integrated into infrastructure planning and investment.

7. **What mechanisms or approaches should the Infrastructure Strategy adopt to ensure that critical cross-cutting priorities, such as housing delivery, regional economic development, and natural infrastructure are systematically embedded in investment planning and decision making?**
   To embed cross-cutting priorities such as housing, regional economic development and natural infrastructure, the Strategy must place community led expertise and experience and plans at the centre of decision making**.** Public bodies should be required to use community action plans and other community generated strategies as evidence in investment planning. These already identify local housing needs, economic opportunities and priorities for natural assets.

   Decision making processes should also require public bodies to assess community led delivery and stewardship options**,** ensuring investment supports community wealth building and long term resilience.

   Finally, regional governance structures must include the community as core partners so that cross cutting priorities are shaped by those with the strongest understanding of local needs.

8. **Are there any findings from the Scottish Future's Trust Needs Assessment (perhaps from drivers of change, cross-cutting themes or enablers) that we should more fully integrate into this 10-year Infrastructure Strategy?**

   Yes. Several findings from the Scottish Futures Trust Needs Assessment should be more fully integrated into the 10-year Infrastructure Strategy, particularly those relating to place-based delivery, prevention and the role of local community organisations.

The Needs Assessment highlights the importance of repurposing existing assets, strengthening local resilience and supporting natural infrastructure. These themes align directly with the work of community owned enterprises, yet this connection is not made explicit in the Strategy. Community organisations are already delivering on many of the identified drivers of change, from net zero and climate adaptation to local economic development and stewardship of land and buildings.

The Strategy should therefore integrate the Needs Assessment's emphasis on:

- Prevention and early intervention, recognising community organisations as key delivery partners.
- Local resilience and place based solutions, ensuring community led plans and priorities inform investment decisions.
- Natural infrastructure and land stewardship, explicitly acknowledging the role of community organisations.

Embedding these findings more clearly would strengthen the Strategy's alignment with the Needs Assessment and ensure that community led infrastructure is recognised as central to delivering long term national outcome

Place Based Approach

9. **Do you support the proposal that infrastructure investment is more directly driven by the priorities of places across Scotland?**

Yes. We strongly support infrastructure investment being more directly driven by the priorities of places across Scotland. Local priorities are best understood by the people who live and work in those communities, and community organisations are often the first to identify viable solutions, repurpose assets and deliver long term stewardship.

For this approach to be effective, place-based investment must be grounded in community generated plans (such as Community Action Plans) and supported by community organisations who hold deep local knowledge. This ensures that investment decisions reflect real need, build local resilience and support community wealth building.

A genuinely place driven approach requires public bodies to work in partnership with communities from the outset, recognising community owned infrastructure as a core part of Scotland's long term investment landscape.

10. **Are the proposed principles, national spatial priorities and place partnerships, the right ones to guide a place-based approach? Are there other principles we should consider?**

We broadly support the proposed principles, national spatial priorities and place partnerships, but they will only deliver a genuinely place based approach if community organisations are recognised as core partners, not peripheral stakeholders.

The principles should explicitly include:

- Community leadership and ownership as a foundation of place-based planning
- Recognition of community anchor organisations as long-term stewards of local assets
- Use of community generated plans (Community Action Plans) as key evidence in decision making

Without these additions, place based policy risks remaining top-down and disconnected from local realities. Community organisations are already delivering housing, regeneration, natural infrastructure and local economic development; the principles should reflect this by embedding community led delivery within the framework.

11. **Do you agree with the Scottish Government's proposal to empower communities to play a more active role in infrastructure decision making? What mechanisms would best support meaningful community involvement and help to maximise local social benefits?**

Yes. We strongly support empowering communities to play a more active role in infrastructure decision making. Communities already understand local needs best and are often the ones delivering practical, long term solutions.

To make involvement meaningful, the Strategy should:

- Recognise the work of Democracy Matters as outlined in the first question
- Use community generated plans (Community Action Plans) as core evidence in investment decisions
- Recognise community anchor organisations as key partners in delivery
- Support community ownership and stewardship models, including asset transfer and shared ownership
- Invest in community capacity, so communities have the resources to participate effectively

These mechanisms will maximise local social benefit and ensure decisions reflect real place based priorities.

12. **Do you believe the current landscape of local and regional partnerships (e.g. Community Planning Partnerships, Regional Economic Partnerships, HubCos, Regional Adaptation Partnerships) provides an**

effective framework for delivering place-based infrastructure investment? Please explain your answer, including any suggestions for improvement of existing structures.

No. The current landscape of local and regional partnerships does not provide an effective framework for delivering place based infrastructure investment. While these structures have value, they generally lack meaningful community representation and as a result they do not fully reflect local priorities or the practical experience of community organisations.

Community Planning Partnerships, Regional Economic Partnerships, HubCos and Regional Adaptation Partnerships tend to be dominated by public sector bodies, with limited routes for community to shape decisions. This leads to place based policy that is often top down, inconsistent and disconnected from the realities of local delivery.

To improve the effectiveness of these structures, the Strategy should:

- Recognise the work of Democracy Matters to embed community as core partners, not consultees
- Require community generated plans (Community Action Plans) to inform regional investment decisions
- Create clearer pathways for community ownership and stewardship within regional programmes
- Invest in community capacity, so communities can participate on an equal footing

A place-based approach can only succeed if communities are recognised as long term stewards of local assets and essential partners in planning and delivery.

Enabling Private Infrastructure

13. **Are there additional sectors or opportunities that should be considered for strategic investment to support economic growth and maximise opportunities for longer-term growth?**

Yes. Strategic investment should also focus on sectors where community led delivery already drives local economic growth.

Key opportunities include:

- Community owned energy which generates long-term local revenue and resilience
- Community ownership of land and assets, supporting regeneration and local enterprise
- Social infrastructure such as community hubs, childcare and community led housing
- Nature based projects delivered by community landowners, creating jobs and climate benefits

These areas offer strong, long term economic returns and anchor wealth within communities.

14. To make the most of the strategic opportunities in renewables, housing, and natural capital, what will the economy need from our infrastructure to grow and thrive up to 2037?

Scotland’s economy will only maximise opportunities in renewables, housing and natural capital if its infrastructure enables community investment.
Key needs include systems that support community owned energy and natural capital projects ensuring local revenue stays local and affordable housing, transport, digital connectivity and community hubs.

Infrastructure that empowers communities to lead, benefit and reinvest locally will drive long term economic growth to 2037.