

ELECTED MEMBER INDUCTION

Climate Change





About this notebook

This briefing provides an introduction to the critical role elected members play in tackling climate change and what this looks like in practice. It also provides an updated overview of Scotland's progress on greenhouse gas emissions reduction and actions to adapt to the impacts of a changing climate.



Legislative and policy context

Scotland's climate framework is anchored in the [Climate Change \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#), which established legally binding emissions reduction targets and introduced Public Bodies Climate Change Duties. These duties require local authorities and other public bodies to take measurable action on climate mitigation, adaptation, and sustainability, supported by annual reporting. This 2009 Act was amended by the [Climate Change \(Emissions Reduction Targets\) \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#) aiming for net-zero by 2045 with significant interim targets of 75% by 2030 and 90% by 2040 compared with 1990.

In November 2024, the [Climate Change \(Emissions Reduction Targets\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) amended the previous Act, refining Scotland's pathway to net-zero emissions by 2045. The new Act replaced annual and interim targets with a carbon budget framework, setting five-year limits on greenhouse gas emissions. This shift aligns Scotland with international best practice, as used in many other countries, for example France, Japan, and England. The new legislation allows carbon budgets to be set through secondary legislation based on expert advice from [the Climate Change Committee](#). The previous annual emissions targets were vulnerable to year-to-year fluctuations caused by events such as cold winters or global pandemics.

Climate action is not just about reducing emissions as we can align climate goals with broader community priorities. It is an opportunity to address societal challenges—such as improving health and wellbeing, enhancing access to services, tackling child and fuel poverty, and fostering sustainable economic development. Progress in these areas is essential, as it not only addresses the climate crisis but also delivers tangible improvements in quality of life and community resilience.

In addition, Scotland has been at the forefront of highlighting the need to include nature and biodiversity in the climate change dialogue. The Scottish Government aims to tackle the nature emergency by protecting and restoring biodiversity, supporting healthy ecosystems, connecting people with the natural world, and maximising the benefits of a diverse natural environment.

Accordingly, the Scottish Government has developed several key plans that outline strategies, policies, and actions across various sectors to meet emissions reduction targets and adapt to the impacts of a changing climate. The [Climate Change Plan \(CCP\) 2018-2032](#), Scotland's emissions reduction strategy (published in December 2020), outlines policies to meet the reduction targets. The CCP is due for imminent revision to reflect the new carbon budget system. Alongside mitigation, the Scottish Government introduced the [Scottish National Adaptation Plan \(SNAP3\)](#) in September 2024, which addresses climate risks, focusing on resilience in infrastructure, ecosystems, and communities.

Crucially, the new Climate Change Act maintains a commitment to a [just transition](#), ensuring that decarbonisation efforts prioritise fairness and equity. The Scottish Government has identified four key sectors for its just transition plans: energy, transport, land use and agriculture, and the built environment and construction.

Under the Act, local authorities and public bodies must submit annual Climate Change Reports, detailing actions to cut emissions, adapt to impacts, and embed sustainability. The [Sustainable Scotland Network](#) (SSN) coordinates this [Public Bodies Climate Change Duties Reporting](#) (PBCCDR) since 2015/16, providing tools and publishing aggregated results to track progress. Besides, the [Scottish Climate Intelligence Service](#) (SCIS) works with all of Scotland's local authorities to help deliver climate action at the scale and pace needed to achieve the goals of Scotland's Climate ambitions.

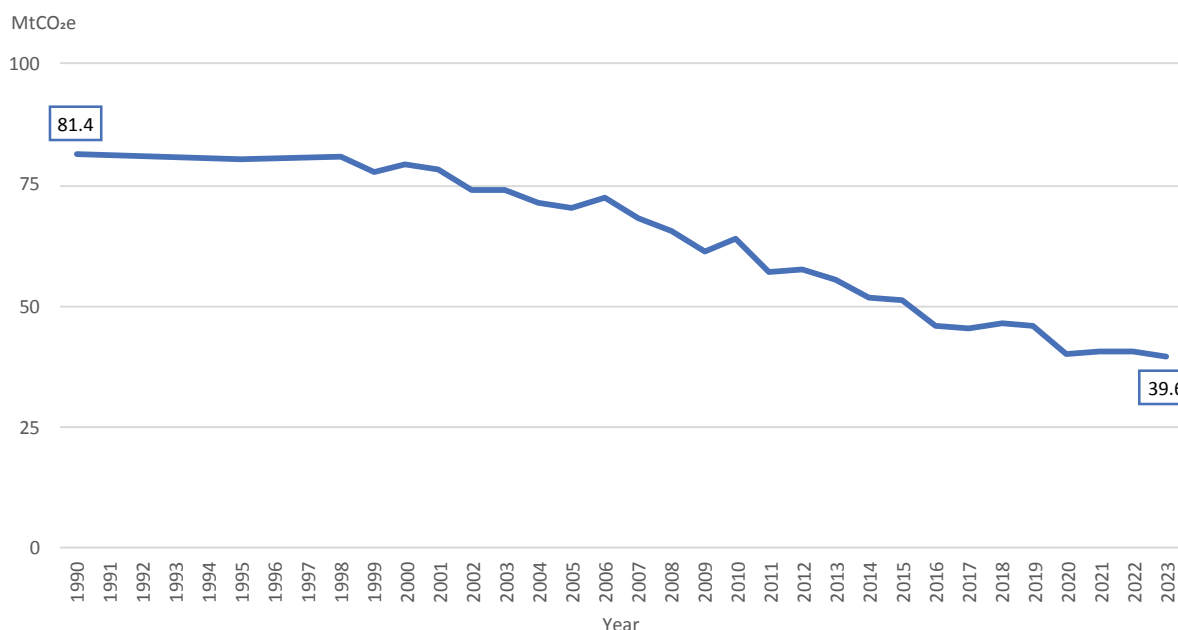
As the 'go to' organisation for Local Government improvement in Scotland, the Improvement Service is committed to supporting local authorities in meeting their climate change duties. We actively engage and collaborate with the local government community and partners to build a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable future for Scotland.

Greenhouse gas emissions in Scotland

Scotland has made significant progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions since 1990. According to the most recent analysis, Scottish source emissions were estimated at 39.6 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO₂e) in 2023, down 50.3% from the 1990 baseline as demonstrated in Figure 1¹.

The most notable progress has been in reducing emissions from electricity generation, with an 93.4% drop driven by the phase-out of coal, increased renewable energy, and a shift to gas. Significant reductions have also been achieved in other sectors: industrial emissions have decreased by 59.5%, waste management emissions by 73.1%, buildings and product use emissions by 31.7%, fuel supply emissions by 55.9%, and domestic transport emissions by 17.3%.

Figure 1: Scottish Greenhouse Gas Emissions, 1990 to 2023²

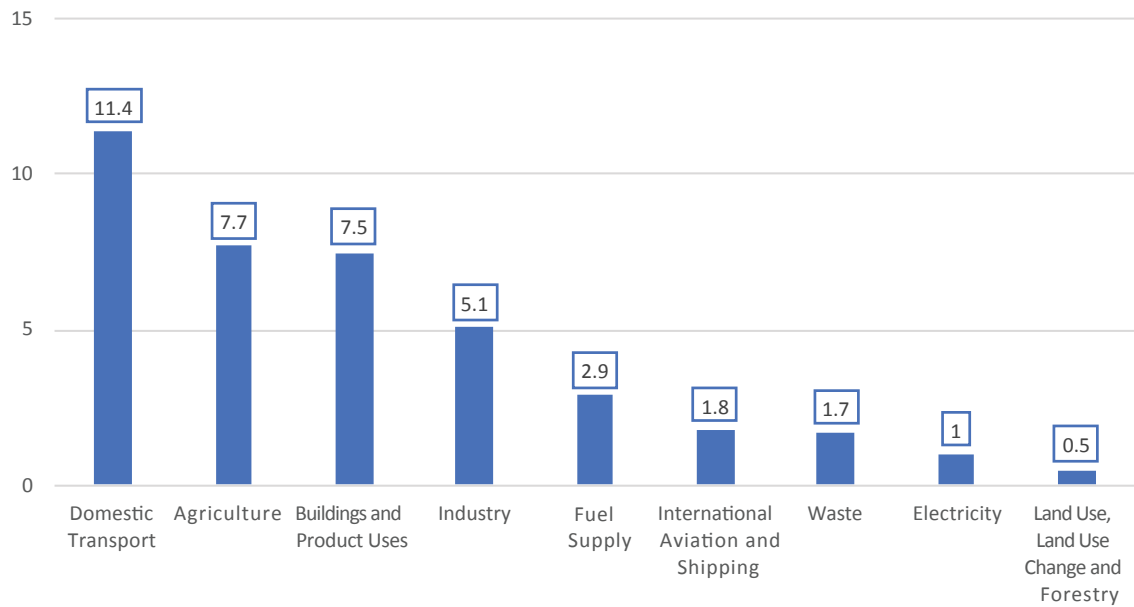


Source: Scottish Government. (2025). *Scottish Greenhouse Gas Statistics 2023*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government [Accessed 25/06/2025].

- 1 MtCO₂e refers to million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent. Note that Figures have been revised since previous year's release to incorporate methodological improvements and new data.
- 2 The Baseline Period uses 1990 for carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide and 1995 for hydro-fluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, sulphur hexafluoride and nitrogen trifluoride. In 2022, CO₂ emissions account for 66.2% of total GHG emissions, followed by Methane emissions (25%), and Nitrous oxide (7.2%).

Domestic transport, agriculture and building remain major emission sources which require urgent action as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Scottish Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Territorial Emissions Statistics Sector, 2023.



Source: Scottish Government. (2025). *Scottish Greenhouse Gas Statistics 2023*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government [Accessed 25/06/2025].



What does this mean for elected members?

Elected members play a vital role in addressing the climate and nature crises, which involve a triple challenge: achieving a just transition to net zero, adapting to a changing climate, and improving the state of nature. While local authority corporate emissions account for only 3-5% of the area-wide carbon footprint, the broader emissions landscape is influenced by a diverse range of stakeholders with varying levels of control and influence. As a result, climate action must extend beyond direct operations to include areas where public bodies can exert influence, such as procurement supply chains, partnerships, and the communities they serve.

To make meaningful progress, targeted interventions are needed to address high-impact emission sources and guide strategic investment decisions. This could include actions such as:

- ▶ retrofitting buildings to enhance energy efficiency.
- ▶ expanding electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
- ▶ leveraging funding opportunities such as the [Just Transition Fund](#) and [Scottish Green Public Sector Estate Decarbonisation Scheme](#).
- ▶ shaping planning policies to support climate goals.

This places elected members in a critical position to lead local climate action.

What can elected members do?

To contribute effectively, it is recommended that elected members ensure robust governance arrangements are in place to influence strategy and policy, as well as scrutinise their council's climate change progress, such as by reviewing climate change reports.

You can use the [Leaders' Climate Emergency Checklist](#) which has been designed to help public sector leaders assess their organisation's readiness and capability to tackle the climate and nature emergencies. Additionally, the Checklist can help identify priority areas for integrating climate and nature responses.

You should also ensure scrutiny of your council's area-wide emissions data to understand your areas baseline emissions and how these can be reduced through local authority actions and progress. This has been developed through the [Scottish Climate Intelligence Service](#) (SCIS) national digital platform which your officers have access to. This scrutiny will support your local authority in planning, monitoring, and delivering climate action at the scale and pace required to achieve net-zero targets. You should ensure your officers are engaging with the Scottish Climate Intelligence Service (SCIS) as it will build local capacity and support informed decision-making.

Decision-making and scrutiny

Understanding the climate change impact of decisions and projects can be complex. Different councils are taking different approaches, some using impact assessments or carbon budgeting to ensure organisation-wide buy in and to assist with decision making. Whatever the approach, leadership must work to understand and analyse the impact of policies and projects, from strategies to capital works and infrastructure.

As an elected member, you could consider:

- ▶ Has your council adopted, or is adopting a clear, detailed and costed approach to climate change adaptation and mitigation? If not, what are the barriers and how can these be overcome? What support is needed?
- ▶ What is the understanding of current Greenhouse Gas Emissions (GHGs) emissions at organisational level and area wide, including the supply chain?
- ▶ Have clear targets been set for key areas such as Net Zero and renewable energy generation which are supported with action plans and resources?
- ▶ Is there a regular review of progress based on evidence and an understanding of climate related opportunities and risks?

Strategy and policy development

It is important to understand the connection between different priorities and to design and implement interventions which are effective and complementary. Action to decarbonise contributes to economic development through job creation, skills, creation of better places for investment and development. The journey to a low carbon society can also improve health and wellbeing through increased energy efficiency of homes, cleaner air and active travel. The direct and indirect health benefits are so great that tackling climate change has also been described by the [Lancet Commission](#) as “the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century”.

As an elected member, you could consider:

- ▶ Do all strategies and plans assess and incorporate the impact of climate change mitigation, adaptation and the just transition? This is particularly important for economic development strategies and policies.
- ▶ Is the relationship between climate change policies and other priorities assessed and used as the basis for decision making?
- ▶ How does your council protect the most vulnerable to climate change, in particular amid the energy crisis, whilst maintaining the commitment to Net Zero?

Community leadership and partnership working

Empowerment at local level is key to successful climate action and you can provide support to community groups and constituents by representing concerns and empowering and mobilising support for the actions needed. This includes working to reduce emissions from the council’s own operations and supply chain and influencing and facilitating a broader net zero approach across your geographical area.

As an elected member, you could consider:

- ▶ Does senior leadership support and champion action on this agenda both internally within the council and externally?
- ▶ How are the council’s climate ambitions communicated externally and are the local community involved in co-design and delivery?
- ▶ How is the council engaging and working with local actors such as Community Planning Partnerships?

No organisation can tackle climate change on its own. A collaborative approach is required with leaders (both political and non-political) working together across all sectors. Elected members have a key role to play in this approach by questioning, scrutinising and working with your communities to promote and deliver the just transition to a Net Zero Scotland by 2045.



Definitions

Net Zero: Achieving a balance between the amount of greenhouse gas emissions released into the atmosphere and the amount removed through sequestration (e.g., tree growth, peat restoration, and carbon capture and storage). ‘Net’ acknowledges that not all emissions can be reduced to zero, so remaining emissions must be balanced, primarily through natural carbon sinks like oceans and forests. This is part of climate change mitigation.

Carbon Budget: A carbon budget sets a limit on the total amount of greenhouse gases that can be emitted over a specific period, typically five years. The UK was the first country to set legally binding carbon budgets, which help ensure a fair and effective pathway to emissions reduction.

Climate Change Mitigation: Actions taken by governments, businesses, or individuals to reduce or prevent greenhouse gas emissions or to enhance carbon sinks that remove these gases from the atmosphere.

Climate Change Adaptation: Actions that reduce vulnerability to the current or expected impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather, sea-level rise, biodiversity loss, and food and water insecurity.

Just Transition: According to the Scottish Government, a just transition is both the outcome—a fairer, greener future for all—and the process undertaken in partnership with those impacted by the transition to net zero. It supports a net-zero and climate-resilient economy while delivering fairness and tackling inequality.



Key organisations

[Scottish Climate Intelligence Service \(SCIS\)](#) – Scotland’s support program empowering local authorities with area-wide emissions data and transition plans. Managed and delivered by the Improvement Service and the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute (ECCI) on behalf of the Scottish Government and Local Government, SCIS provides both a national digital platform and a co-designed support service to help Local Authorities effectively address climate change.

[Sustainable Scotland Network \(SSN\)](#) – Established in 2003, SSN is Scotland’s public sector network dedicated to climate change and sustainability. As the lead organisation supporting Public Bodies Climate Change Duties Reporting, SSN assists Scotland’s public sector in meeting its climate obligations. Hosted by the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute at the University of Edinburgh, SSN provides key resources, training, and guidance—including support for climate reporting—to help public bodies transition to net zero emissions.

[Adaptation Scotland](#) – Scotland’s support programme on climate change adaptation and resilience, managed by [Verture](#) on behalf of the Scottish Government.

[ClimateXChange](#) – Scotland’s centre of expertise on climate change. It supports the development of policies for adapting to climate change and transitioning to net zero.

[Edinburgh Climate Change Institute \(ECCI\)](#) – A leading centre of expertise on climate change, based at the University of Edinburgh. ECCI integrates research, policy, and practice across various programmes to build the essential skills, knowledge, and capacity needed to deliver climate action in Scotland and beyond.

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