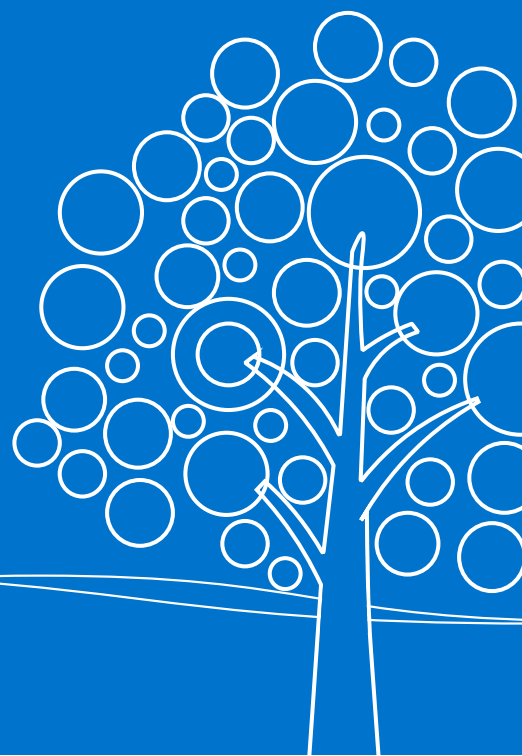


A Right to Learn

Our manifesto for the
Scottish Elections 2026



Foreword

Education has the power to change lives. It opens doors, builds confidence, and creates pathways into work, community and participation. Yet for too many disabled people, carers and others facing disadvantage across Scotland, that promise remains out of reach.

This manifesto, **A Right to Learn**, sets out what we hear every day through our services, particularly our national Disabled Students' Helpline.



Demand for the Helpline continues to grow, yet, like many services across Scotland, it operates within constrained resources, limiting when people can access support.

It reflects the real experiences of people navigating a system that too often feels fragmented, under-resourced and difficult to access. From digital exclusion and inaccessible learning, to broken transitions and limited routes to justice, the barriers are clear and persistent.

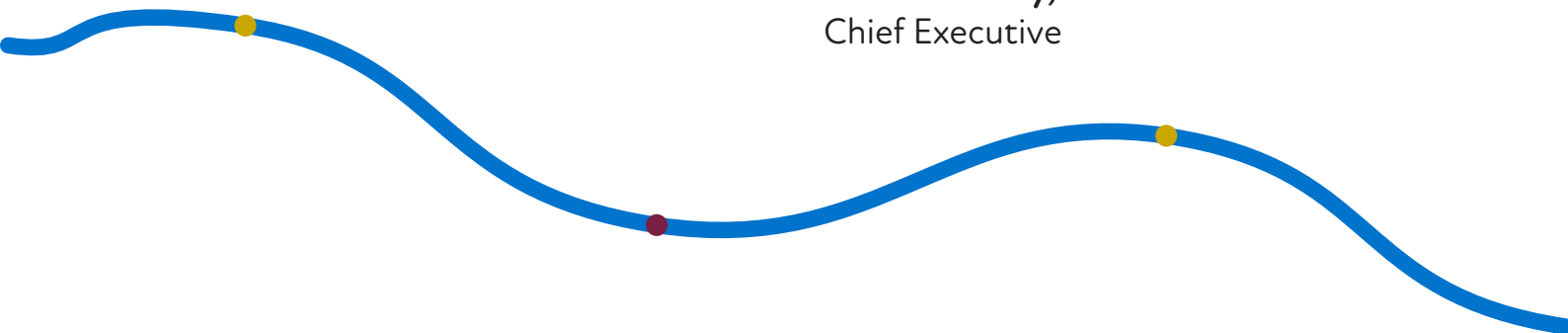
The six priorities outlined in this document are practical, achievable and rooted in evidence. They call for a Scotland where learning is genuinely accessible, where support is consistent, and where disabled people can move through education and into adult life with dignity, choice and opportunity.

At Lead Scotland, we see every day what works. When people are given the right support, in the right way, at the right time, the impact is transformative. People gain skills, confidence and independence. They reconnect with their communities. They move into further learning, volunteering and employment. The challenge is not a lack of solutions, but a lack of consistent commitment and investment.

This manifesto is a clear ask to all political parties ahead of the 2026 Scottish elections. It is a call to move beyond short-term thinking and towards a system that is fair, sustainable and built around people's lives.

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "R McKay". The signature is stylized and fluid, written over a white background.

Robert McKay,
Chief Executive



We call upon all political parties to commit to the following six priorities:



Ensure everyone can access digital services and the support to use them



Expand flexible, accessible learning that works around people's lives



Fix broken transitions for disabled people from school to college, work and adult life



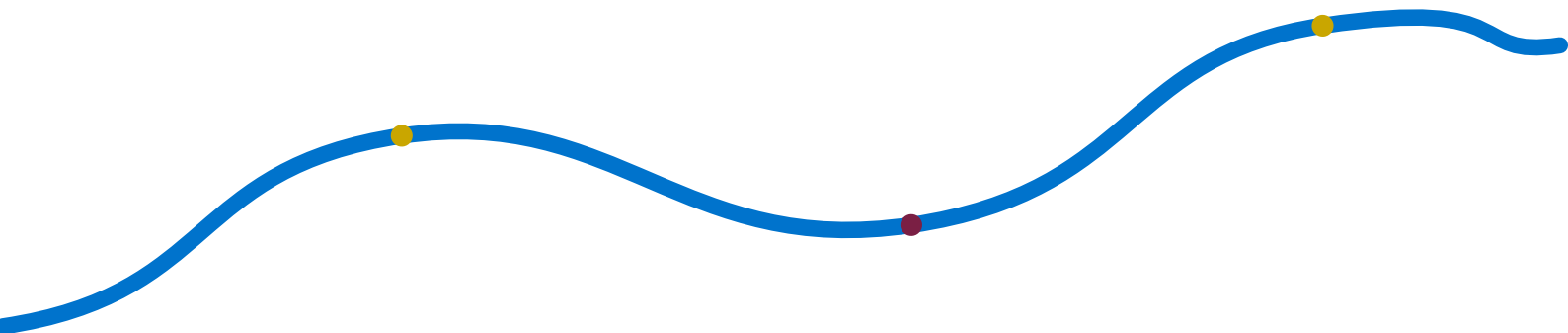
Tackle loneliness by investing in community connection and support



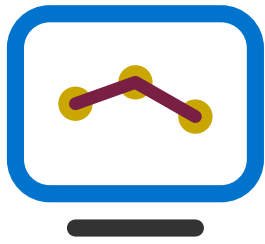
Provide fair, long-term funding for essential support services people rely on



Improve disabled students' access to justice, with clear, fair routes to put things right



1. Guarantee digital inclusion



- Support everyone to live digitally in society and keep safe online, especially older and disabled people.
- Provide sustainable funding streams to address digital poverty.
- Ensure affordable access to up-to-date devices and reliable Wi-Fi.
- Fund one-to-one support and on-going training for disabled people and carers who need it.
- A right to digital choice: people must be able to access public services offline as well as online.

“One of the barriers (to post-school learning) is definitely digital access, the assumption everyone can use, access, and troubleshoot a device is beyond ridiculous. Digital poverty is very real and present.”

(Respondent to online survey)

Why this matters

Many of us were already living a big chunk of our lives online and in digital spaces before the Covid-19 pandemic. But with the onset of lockdowns and social distancing, it became more urgent to have access to a device and reliable Wi-Fi.

From shopping, claiming benefits and banking, to learning, working and socialising, it is almost impossible to avoid the need to engage with digital tools and spaces at some point, especially as we move deeper into the strange new world of Automated Intelligence (AI).

Essentially, if you can't get online, you are likely to face some level of disadvantage and exclusion.

Our staff work with disabled and older people in communities across Scotland and witness the barriers they face firsthand. We know from our work and wider evidence that disabled and older people are less likely to have access to an up-to-date device, a reliable connection to the internet and the skills necessary to navigate it all. The need for assistive technology creates further disadvantage for disabled people.

“Rapid changes in digital platforms, including government websites, overwhelm service users, especially those with autism or neurodiverse conditions who cannot negotiate change.”

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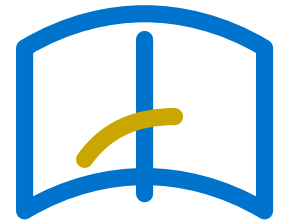
(Staff member during in-person plenary feedback)

“We need more longer-term digital inclusion support that is made a clear priority. It needs to be both embedded in existing services, and there needs to be specific support to bridge the skills gap.”

(Respondent to online survey)

2. Offer more accessible, flexible learning choices

- Ensure post-school learning is genuinely accessible for disabled people, with proper funding, timely needs assessments, effective support, lived experience-led training, and strong quality assurance.
- Expand remote and flexible learning options so disabled learners and carers can fit study around health and caring responsibilities.
- Provide longer-term, meaningful learning beyond life skills and employability, with clear progression into further learning, work, volunteering, and participation.



“Disabled learners want to access more in-depth and longer courses, not just short community courses.”

(Respondent to online survey)

Why this matters

Disabled people are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to have advanced qualifications or be in work than non-disabled people. Education can help break this cycle, so it is vital disabled people can access, participate, progress and succeed in post-school learning.

Our Disabled Students’ Helpline provides a unique, national insight into the barriers disabled learners face. The evidence we receive shows there is still significant work to do.

While good practice exists, students continue to report inaccessible teaching spaces, refusal of

practical support and restrictions on recording lectures. Where these issues persist, they can lead to higher withdrawal rates, reinforcing inequality.

The Helpline also receives regular enquiries about remote learning. Despite progress during the pandemic, many courses have returned to in-person only delivery, creating a barrier for those unable to attend due to their condition.

We also hear from parents and carers that options for young disabled people leaving school are often limited, with little choice, progression, or consistent support to access mainstream learning.

“It is a constant battle trying to get proper support. Why are the government making it so hard? It makes you just not want to be here. The system has let my family down very badly!”

(Respondent to online survey)

“I did a course and there was no support. It was a mainstream course. I didn’t get the right kind of support that met my needs to allow me to fully access the learning.”

(Respondent to online survey)

3. Improve transitions for young disabled people



- Fund appropriate information and advice services to be accessible to young people.
- Centre planning around the young person so their voice is heard and their choices explored.
- Establish transition teams in every local authority.
- Develop a national passport of needs with learners and carers.
- Increase post-school provision choices for young disabled people with complex needs.
- Fund more specialist colleges, e.g. Corseford College.

“We need a clearer path that is widely known. For many you don’t find out about help/support until you breakdown over your disability or caring role!”

(Respondent to online survey)

Why this matters

The challenges of transition into adult life for young disabled people are well documented, yet this remains one of the most common and contentious issues raised through our Disabled Students’ Helpline. Transitions are too often poorly planned across the system. Young people can end up in the wrong placement, start college without support in place, or rely on families to fill gaps where transport or provision fails.

In the worst cases, young people drop out or never begin at all, left at home without structure, learning or purpose. Parents contacting us report worsening mental health and increased strain.

Even where planning is strong, it falls short if the right opportunities are not available. Provision in Scotland does not meet the needs of young people with more complex requirements. Too many are left in unsuitable care placements or with no option at all, forcing families out of work and into poverty.

This is not a marginal gap. Corseford College is the only government-funded specialist college in Scotland, with very limited places and funding secured only until 2027. For a national system, that level of provision is nowhere near sufficient.

“Long term meaningful transitions from school (should be a priority for candidates).”

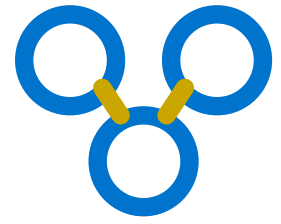
(Respondent to online survey)

“This area seems to be going backwards for those with high needs/learning disabilities. People need long term options and choice.”

(Respondent to online survey)

4. Strengthen communities and tackle loneliness

- Invest in community-based adult learning, not just provision for young people.
- Fund opportunities that reduce social isolation and loneliness.
- Create accessible community spaces with access to free, reliable Wi-Fi.
- Improve rural transport links to enable access to community spaces and learning.
- Ensure adult learning strategies value volunteering and community participation alongside employability.



“Stop penalising the disabled, let them live and make it easier. Give more support to disabled, there is practically none for post school. It is shocking and has huge impact on their health and wellbeing. No one cares enough.”

(Respondent to online survey)

Why this matters

Evidence shows disabled people are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness than non-disabled people. Befriending services like those we deliver in Fife are vital in addressing this. For many, barriers including restricted mobility, ill health and low confidence limit opportunities to connect, making safe, supportive environments an important first step back into community life.

Learners tell us that accessing local learning and befriending services can be difficult or impossible due to limited accessible transport, particularly in rural areas. While we sometimes provide support in people’s homes, this is not sustainable across

the sector. Improving accessible rural transport must therefore be a priority.

Many people we support left school without qualifications or could not progress into further learning. Access to well-resourced, local, person-centred Community-Based Adult Learning (CBAL) is therefore essential. It enables people to move into learning, volunteering or work, or simply gain everyday skills. Despite this, CBAL remains under-recognised and underfunded within the wider system.

“There is also the impact then of not being able to even afford bus travel, meaning support is a postcode lottery and in some cases a luxury.”

(Staff member)

“We need better access to local learning facilities.”

(Respondent to online survey)

5. Deliver fair, sustainable funding



- Provide multi-year funding (three to five years) to support service stability, workforce retention and continuity for learners.
- Allocate a fairer share of Scotland's post-school learning budget to community-based adult learning.
- Simplify funding processes by aligning applications and streamlining reporting across local authorities.

“Such abrupt endings disrupt service users progress and erodes trust in the staff and services provided. These sudden endings also can result in loss of the volunteer and the amount of resources and support that has gone into their recruitment and retention.”

(Staff member)

Why this matters

Facing the same funding cliff edge each March is unsustainable. Organisations like ours are left unsure whether staff can be retained, services will continue, or learners and befriendedees will be supported. We are not alone. Many Scottish Government-funded charities face this uncertainty each year. Without stable, multi-year funding, we cannot plan effectively, recruit and retain staff, or provide continuity. Learners risk sudden and damaging service closures. Three to five year funding is essential.

Community-Based Adult Learning (CBAL) must also receive a fairer share of Scotland's tertiary

education budget. CBAL reaches some of the most vulnerable people, delivering local, person-centred support that leads to meaningful improvements in wellbeing and life chances. Yet it receives a small and declining share of funding. In 2022–23, adult learning across all 32 local authorities received £32.3 million, compared to over £1 billion for colleges and universities.

Reporting requirements should also be streamlined. Consistent processes across local authorities would reduce duplication, free up staff time, and allow charities to focus on delivery rather than administration.

“Programmes...often cease with minimal notice, leaving service users without adequate exit planning or guidance on subsequent steps or signposting to other activities and resources and other sources of support.”

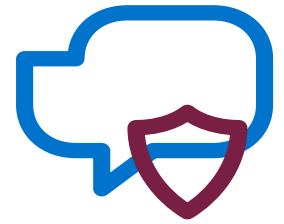
(Staff member)

“I think it's because projects and offers change so quickly due to short term funding. So you are just reliant on someone who knows someone.”

(Respondent to online survey)

6. Improve access to justice for disabled students

- Reform legal aid in Scotland to improve access for disabled students.
- Introduce accessible Alternative Dispute Resolution for students raising complaints with education providers.
- Act on disabled students' views, not just gather them.
- Pay or recognise disabled people and carers for their lived experience input to policies and resources.
- Establish independent oversight of disability support at colleges and universities to reduce complaints and improve outcomes for disabled students.



“Implement a better system of oversight and compliance to ensure colleges and universities are held to account when it comes to providing the right support and meeting disabled people’s learning needs.”

(Respondent to online survey)

Why this matters

Around one third of our helpline calls relate to disputes between disabled students and their college or university. When issues arise, options for support, advocacy and redress are limited. Independent advocacy is scarce, with restrictive eligibility and long waiting lists.

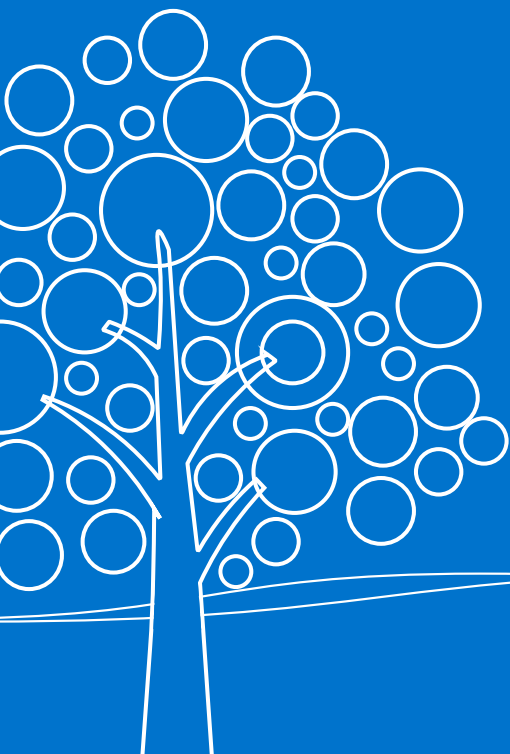
The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman can consider complaints but cannot rule on disability discrimination under the Equality Act. While students can theoretically pursue legal action, this is often financially out of reach. Most rely on legal aid, but then there are few solicitors in Scotland able to take on these cases.

This contrasts sharply with the options for pupils with additional support needs, where mediation, adjudication, appeals and tribunal routes are in place, alongside publicly funded legal representation.

When disabled young people move into further or higher education, these routes fall away. Students are left without effective recourse, often facing distress, worsening health, and early withdrawal from courses, with lasting impacts on their opportunities and outcomes.

“As a disabled applicant and litigant in person, I have experienced first-hand that the Equality Act 2010 provides rights in theory but not in practice. Admissions systems ask us to disclose disability, but structurally prevent that information from influencing decisions. Without access to legal aid or representation, enforcing those rights becomes a test of endurance rather than a matter of justice. Many disabled people cannot sustain that process. A right that cannot be enforced is not a protection, it is a promise the system has chosen not to keep.”

(Helpline caller)



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