



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH Academy of Sport

SPORT FOR SOCIAL GOOD

MOVING SCOTLAND FORWARD

A Strategic Policy Report on Prevention, Inclusion, Football, Cross-Portfolio Investment and International Influence — with a Five-Year Delivery Plan and a Longer-Term National Trajectory

MORE THAN A GAME

Sports Policy Briefing Note | September 2026

Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. The Case for Sport as Social Infrastructure
3. Prevention and the Scottish Public-Service Challenge
4. Football: Scotland's Largest Scalable Platform
5. Inclusion and Health Equity
6. Youth, Education, Justice and Communities
7. Cross-Portfolio Investment Model
8. Measurement, Social Value and SROI
9. International Engagement and Soft Power
10. Implementation Options: The First Five Years
11. Beyond Five Years: A Longer-Term Trajectory
12. Priority Questions: Strategic Q&A
13. Recommendations
14. Conclusion
15. One-Page Ministerial Briefing

1. Executive Summary

Scotland should move from thinking about ‘funding sport’ to thinking about ‘investing through sport’. Sport is not simply recreation: properly designed and delivered, it is social infrastructure capable of contributing simultaneously to health, wellbeing, education, community cohesion, employability, justice, equality, economic development and international engagement.

This report sets out how sport can deliver social good for Scotland, why the country under-invests in prevention despite believing in it, and how a national ‘Sport for Social Good’ strategy — branded here as Moving Scotland Forward — can be delivered. It goes further than previous framing by setting out genuine implementation options for the first five years, rather than a single fixed path, and by describing what a credible trajectory looks like beyond five years, since the largest gains from prevention typically take a decade or more to materialise.

The strongest strategic opportunity remains football. Independent 2026 analysis by the Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde — commissioned by the SPFL, SWPL and Scottish FA — found that Scottish professional football supported 14,315 full-time-equivalent jobs and contributed £820 million in GVA to the Scottish economy in 2023–24 once spectator spending and spillover effects are included (£660 million net of non-additional spending). This is before accounting for the social value generated by community trusts, grassroots clubs and the rapidly growing women’s game.

Scotland should adopt a genuinely cross-portfolio approach. Health, Justice, Education, Communities, Economy and International Affairs all have direct reasons to invest in sport, because sport can help deliver outcomes that sit within each of their remits. This matters most for prevention, where the organisation that pays for an intervention is rarely the one that captures the financial benefit — the central structural reason Scotland finds prevention easier to endorse in principle than to fund in practice.

The report recommends a national Moving Scotland Forward strategy, supported by cross-portfolio governance, common evaluation standards, multi-year commissioning and a Scottish sports diplomacy framework. It presents three delivery options for Years 1–5 — Foundational, Balanced and Accelerated — that trade off pace, cost and risk, and a two-tier long-term trajectory covering Years 6–10 and a 10–20-year generational horizon, so that decision-makers can choose a pace that matches fiscal reality without losing sight of the destination.

KEY PROPOSITION

Sport should be treated as preventative, community and international infrastructure — not simply as a discretionary leisure budget.

2. The Case for Sport as Social Infrastructure

Social good is activity that improves collective wellbeing rather than simply individual or corporate profit. Sport is a powerful vehicle for it because its social impact depends entirely on how it is designed and delivered — it functions as what researchers call a ‘social fact’: a tool whose effect is shaped by intent, not an automatic by-product of participation. The relevant policy question is therefore not how many people participate, but what outcomes participation produces, for whom, where, and at what cost.

Physical and mental wellbeing

Regular activity supports physical health, mental wellbeing, self-esteem and social connection, and is associated with lower rates of anxiety and loneliness.

Community cohesion

Clubs and activities provide shared spaces where people from different backgrounds meet, volunteer and build relationships — bridging divides of class, ethnicity, age and geography that few other institutions reach voluntarily.

Youth development and education

Sport can build leadership, resilience, teamwork, routine and transferable skills that support future employability, particularly when paired with structured mentoring rather than unstructured play alone.

Justice and prevention

Structured sport combined with trusted mentoring can provide positive alternatives, safe spaces and consistent adult relationships for young people at risk of offending or disengagement.

Advocacy and visibility

National teams, clubs and athletes command audiences and platforms that reach well beyond the scope of formal public services, from anti-racism campaigns to child-poverty initiatives.

3. Prevention and the Scottish Public-Service Challenge

Prevention in Scotland is not primarily a funding problem. The Christie Commission found that an estimated 40–45% of public spending already goes on ‘failure demand’ — reactive spending on problems a preventative approach could have avoided. That is not evidence of a resource shortage; it is evidence that a very large pool of money is already being spent, just at the wrong end of the problem. The real difficulty is institutional design: how budgets are structured, how time horizons are rewarded, how evidence is defined, and what is legally required. Sport sits at the sharpest edge of that difficulty, because a single well-designed intervention can generate health, social, educational and community benefits simultaneously, which is exactly the kind of value that siloed, short-horizon budgeting struggles to recognise.

Four institutional-design problems, not one funding gap

- **An attribution problem:** when an intervention works, the savings usually land in a different budget from the one that paid for it. A council-funded football programme that reduces youth offending or anti-social behaviour delivers its financial savings into NHS Scotland or Scottish Prison Service balance sheets — not into the budget that took the financial risk. No single body can capture the return on its own investment.
- **A time-horizon problem:** preventative spend yields results over 10–20 years, while Holyrood’s electoral cycle, spending reviews and ministerial tenure operate on a much shorter horizon. Nothing in the system rewards a decision-maker for a cost avoided under a future government.
- **A design and evidence problem:** much of what is labelled ‘prevention’ is delivered as generic activity rather than a specific, fidelity-checked intervention with a defined mechanism of change, target group,

dosage and follow-up. Without shared standards for what counts as genuine preventive practice, it is difficult to distinguish real prevention from well-intentioned provision — which weakens the evidence base needed to justify reallocating money that is already being spent.

- **A statutory problem:** unlike countries such as Finland, Scotland has no formal Sports Act or equivalent duty compelling ‘adequate’ preventive investment. Because that duty does not exist, prevention spending remains permanently discretionary and is typically the first thing cut when something else must be protected.

A further practical consequence follows from all four: many local authorities and leisure trusts operate on twelve-month funding agreements, producing workforce instability and constant risk that even a proven preventive programme disappears before its benefits can be realised. The policy implication is not simply ‘spend more’, but to redesign the system so that budgets, time horizons, evidence standards and legal duties align — moving from a single sport budget towards shared investment in which the portfolios that ultimately capture the savings help fund the intervention that produced them.

Current system constraints: the evidence (2024–25)

Beyond the structural logic above, the current state of local delivery shows these constraints operating in practice, not just in theory. Audit Scotland’s October 2025 review of council culture and leisure services, and independent research commissioned by Community Leisure UK, Creative Scotland and sportscotland, together set out the clearest evidence base for where the system is currently failing sport’s potential to deliver social good.

Constraint	Evidence (2024–25)	Effect on social good
Falling real-terms investment	Council net spend on culture and leisure fell 3% in real terms between 2018/19 and 2023/24 (£675m in 2023/24); independent EKOS research puts the longer-run real-terms cut at 20% or more since 2010/11, rising to 33% in some local authorities	Less capacity precisely where preventative and community programmes are meant to scale
Rising charges	Income from charging for culture and leisure services rose 27% in real terms since 2018/19, reaching £118m in 2023/24	Cost becomes a growing barrier for exactly the low-income households the strategy needs to reach
Facility and service withdrawal	Visits to sports facilities fell 21% between 2018/19 and 2023/24; around a third of Arm’s-Length External Organisations (ALEOs) have already closed facilities	Reduced local access, disproportionately affecting rural and deprived communities most reliant on council-run facilities
No statutory floor	Councils retain full discretion over service levels; culture and leisure has absorbed a disproportionate share of savings	Sport is structurally first in line for cuts, with no legal backstop
Data and evaluation gaps	Audit Scotland found that gaps in data collected locally and nationally mean the health, wellbeing and prevention impact of service reductions is not fully understood	The sector cannot yet evidence the cost of disinvestment, weakening the case for reinvestment
Workforce and delivery instability	Staff reductions have accompanied budget cuts across councils and ALEOs; much frontline delivery (for example Active Schools, at ~92%	Limits to how far community programmes can scale without professional workforce investment

Constraint	Evidence (2024–25)	Effect on social good
	volunteer-delivered) already relies on volunteer capacity	

Taken together, these constraints form a self-reinforcing cycle: real-terms cuts fall on culture and leisure because there is no statutory protection; data gaps mean the resulting harm cannot be evidenced; without evidence there is a weaker case for cross-portfolio co-funding; and without co-funding, sport remains trapped in a single, shrinking budget line that is first in line for the next round of savings. Breaking this cycle is the central purpose of the cross-portfolio investment model set out in Section 7.

4. Football: Scotland’s Largest Scalable Platform

Football should be central to the strategy without becoming the whole strategy. Its comparative advantage is scale and reach: professional clubs, grassroots clubs, national teams, supporters, volunteers, community trusts and international relationships together form a network that no other Scottish institution can match.

Current economic evidence

The Fraser of Allander Institute’s 2026 analysis, commissioned by the SPFL, SWPL and Scottish FA, found that during the 2023–24 season the Scottish professional football sector itself contributed £545 million in GVA and supported 9,245 full-time-equivalent jobs. Once spectator spending and wider spillover effects are included, this rises to £820 million in GVA and 14,315 FTE jobs (£660 million and 12,575 jobs net of non-additional spending). Total sector turnover reached £426 million, football accounted for roughly 20% of Scotland’s direct sports and recreation GVA, and attendances across professional matches involving Scottish teams topped 6.8 million in the season studied.

Football as an anchor institution

Community trusts and clubs act as trusted entry points for people who may not readily engage with conventional state services. Initiatives such as Street Soccer Scotland and various club community trusts use football as a route into wider support, including mental health services, housing assistance, employability and addiction recovery. Reported figures on the specific scale of individual club community-trust impact (for example, regional NHS savings attributed to particular programmes) are cited by the organisations themselves and should be treated as club-reported estimates rather than independently verified national statistics until confirmed through a standardised evaluation framework.

Women and girls

The rapid growth of the Scottish Women’s Premier League gives clubs an opportunity to scale mental resilience, leadership and physical-health programmes tailored to women and girls, addressing a demographic that has historically been under-served by sporting infrastructure. Women’s football should be resourced as social infrastructure, not only as sporting development.

5. Inclusion and Health Equity

Sport is not automatically inclusive, and in Scotland it currently mirrors deprivation rather than counteracting it. According to the 2022 Scottish Household Survey, cited in SPICe's 2025 briefing on participation barriers, only 37% of people living in Scotland's most deprived areas participate in sport and physical activity, compared with 64% of those in the least deprived areas — a 27-percentage-point gap that has proven persistent over time. A national strategy must therefore target unequal access directly rather than simply seek to raise aggregate participation.

Barrier	Who is most affected	Policy response
Cost and equipment	Low-income households	Sliding-scale fees, equipment libraries, local free provision
Physical accessibility	Disabled participants	Ramps, hoists, adapted equipment and trained coaches
Geography and transport	Rural communities, youths, older people	Transport links, local hubs, outreach delivery
Culture and religion	Minoritised ethnic and religious groups	Flexible scheduling, dress codes, single-sex sessions
Confidence and discrimination	Women, LGBTQ+ people, beginners	EDI-trained coaching, belonging-first club culture

sportscotland evidence corroborates persistent participation inequalities linked to deprivation and disability. This strengthens the case for an equity-weighted approach, in which the greatest investment is directed towards the communities and groups facing the greatest barriers, rather than distributed evenly regardless of need.

6. Youth, Education, Justice and Communities

Active Schools demonstrates the scale of Scotland's existing sporting infrastructure. sportscotland's recent evaluation reports approximately 279,000 participants, around five million visits and roughly 20,000 deliverers in 2024/25, with 92% of deliverers volunteering — a substantial, largely organic national network of social capital that a national strategy can build on rather than duplicate.

For justice, the emphasis should fall on structured programmes with clearly defined target groups, trained staff, mentoring and measurable outcomes, rather than assuming that sporting activity automatically reduces offending. Late-night activities, community pitches and club-based youth programmes can provide valuable diversionary infrastructure where the evidence supports it, but should be commissioned against outcome measures, not attendance alone.

For education, sport can be connected to leadership, attendance, confidence, volunteering, qualifications and employability, making the school–club–community pathway more systematic than it currently is.

Increasing sport's preventive value: what actually needs to change

Sport itself does not prevent illness or crime — the psychosocial scaffolding built around it does: structure, relationships, mentoring, consistency and clear goals. Increasing sport's preventive value means deliberately engineering more of that scaffolding, rather than assuming that participation alone does the work.

For health outcomes

- Move from open participation to targeted, prescribed pathways: GP or allied-health social prescribing that refers specific patients (inactive, at cardiovascular or metabolic risk, isolated) into programmes with a defined frequency and duration, not drop-in access alone.
- Build continuity into the model: sustained multi-year engagement with the same coaches or groups produces materially more health benefit than one-off sessions, particularly for mental health and chronic-disease management.
- Track actual health measures — activity levels, validated wellbeing scales, GP contact rates — rather than attendance figures, so referral pathways meet the same evidence standard the NHS expects elsewhere.

For crime and violence reduction

- Pair structured diversion with case management: the evidence consistently shows unstructured provision has little effect on offending, whereas a trained mentor, defined behavioural goals and links into education, housing or substance-use support alongside the sport is what actually shifts outcomes.
- Target by risk and by time and place, not universally: concentrate provision on the highest-risk young people and the specific evenings and locations where violence clusters — the logic behind midnight-football models — rather than spreading resource thinly across a general population.
- Use credible messengers: coaches or mentors with genuine standing in the community are often the actual active ingredient, since trust with at-risk groups matters more than the sport itself.
- Build in an exit pathway, so the programme is a route into education, training or employment rather than an occupying activity that ends when funding does.

Neither list works without shared fidelity standards — a common definition of what a genuine preventive sport programme looks like (staffing ratios, referral criteria, minimum duration, outcome tracking), consistent with the design-and-evidence problem identified in Section 3. Fidelity standards are what allow cross-portfolio investment (Section 7) to be targeted at models proven to work, rather than at sport-for-good activity in general.

7. Cross-Portfolio Investment Model

The report proposes a Joint Preventative Spend and Sports Infrastructure Board, bringing together the portfolios that stand to benefit from sport-driven outcomes. Any specific membership and funding percentages set out here should be read as a policy proposal for consultation, not as an existing Scottish Government mechanism.

Portfolio	Potential investment rationale
Health & Social Care	Prevention, physical activity, mental wellbeing, social prescribing
Justice	Youth diversion, community safety and rehabilitation
Education	Engagement, attendance, leadership and skills
Communities	Belonging, volunteering and cohesion
Economy & Fair Work	Jobs, events, tourism, skills and local economic activity
Equality	Closing participation and outcome gaps

Portfolio	Potential investment rationale
International Affairs	Diplomacy, trade, development and soft power

Proposed governance

A national board should bring together Finance, Health, Justice, Education, Communities, Economy and International Affairs alongside the SFA, sportscotland, COSLA, NHS Scotland, governing bodies and community-sector expertise. Its purpose should be to identify programmes where sport can deliver measurable cross-portfolio outcomes, and to create shared commissioning mechanisms so that budgets follow the outcomes they help create.

8. Measurement, Social Value and SROI

Scotland should move beyond counting participants and sessions towards a national evaluation framework measuring outcomes across health, wellbeing, education, justice, equality, volunteering, economic activity and international engagement.

Scottish Rugby provides a useful proof of concept: its own SROI assessment estimated £159.16 million of annual value from grassroots rugby, comprising £103.31 million in health and wellbeing benefits, £41.20 million in social benefits and £13.46 million in economic benefits, equivalent to £7.71 of social value per £1 invested. These figures come from a sport-specific SROI report commissioned by the governing body itself; they illustrate the scale of value that credible SROI methodology can surface, but should be treated as a single-sport estimate rather than a universal return applicable to all sporting activity, pending independent replication.

A national Scottish framework should use transparent assumptions, attribution analysis, counterfactuals, sensitivity testing and independent evaluation. The objective is credible, comparable investment evidence — not headline numbers designed for advocacy.

9. International Engagement and Soft Power

Scotland is a small nation with an outsized global football footprint. Traditional Scottish soft power has often leaned on heritage — ‘tartanry’: kilts, castles and shortbread. Sport offers a route to project Scotland instead as a progressive, modern and collaborative nation. The men’s national team’s appearance at the 2026 FIFA World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico — Scotland’s first finals in 28 years — has already delivered that high-visibility platform: a group-stage campaign against Haiti, Morocco and Brazil that generated sustained international coverage and record domestic engagement, even though the team was eliminated at the group stage. The strategic task now is to convert that visibility into lasting diplomatic and economic relationships rather than let it fade with the tournament.

Pillar 1: Progressive soft power projection

Use major tournaments and the international visibility of national teams to project Scotland’s commitments to equality and inclusion, converting the goodwill generated by supporters into diplomatic capital and entry points for the Scottish Government’s international directorates.

Pillar 2: Bilateral trade and economic gateways

Partner with Scotland House hubs to align trade and innovation missions with major club fixtures and international tours, and export Scotland's expertise in sports data analytics and community coaching into international markets.

Pillar 3: Human rights and development cooperation

Deploy Scotland's Sport-for-Development expertise to support United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, aligning the Scottish Government's international development work with established sports charities to build long-term, reciprocal partnerships rather than one-off goodwill missions.

10. Implementation Options: The First Five Years

Rather than propose a single fixed path, this report sets out three credible delivery options for Years 1–5. Each reaches the same destination — a functioning cross-portfolio sport-for-social-good system — but differs in pace, up-front cost and risk tolerance. Government can select an option, or blend elements of each, depending on fiscal conditions and political appetite.

Option A — Foundational (evidence-first, low cost)

Builds governance and evaluation capability before committing significant new money. Suited to a constrained fiscal environment where trust and evidence must be established before further investment is justified.

- Year 1: Establish a non-statutory cross-portfolio working group; stocktake existing programmes; agree common evaluation principles.
- Years 2–3: Run three to five modest pilots (deprivation, disability, rural, women and girls, youth justice) funded mainly from reallocated existing budgets.
- Years 4–5: Evaluate pilots rigorously; publish the first Sport for Social Good dashboard; use the evidence to make the case for the next spending review.

Option B — Balanced (phased scale-up) — recommended default

Matches the pace implied by the Scottish Government's additional £40 million commitment to the 2026–27 sport budget, combining early governance with meaningful pilot investment and a clear scale-up pathway.

- Year 1: Establish cross-portfolio governance; map existing programmes; agree common evaluation standards; select pilot communities.
- Years 2–3: Run pilots across health, youth justice, education, women and girls, disability, deprivation and rural communities.
- Years 3–4: Identify programmes with strong evidence and move them onto multi-year commissioning.
- Years 4–5: Begin embedding successful approaches into NHS pathways, local authority plans, education, justice and international development.

Option C — Accelerated (front-loaded investment)

Captures the political and sporting momentum still running from Scotland's 2026 World Cup campaign, the 2026–27 budget uplift, and existing SROI evidence from Scottish Rugby and the Scottish FA — rather than waiting for new pilot evidence in areas where credible evidence already exists.

- Year 1: Establish governance on an explicitly statute-track basis; create a ring-fenced cross-portfolio fund; roll out proven models (for example GP social prescribing via football, midnight football leagues) immediately rather than piloting from scratch.
- Year 2: Introduce a national SROI mandate across all 32 local authorities.
- Year 3: Make multi-year (3–5 year) commissioning the default; launch the sports diplomacy framework while public and international interest generated by the 2026 World Cup campaign is still fresh.
- Years 4–5: Full cross-portfolio co-financing formula in operation; annual public dashboard; women's football infrastructure investment substantially increased.

Dimension	Option A: Foundational	Option B: Balanced	Option C: Accelerated
Pace	Slow — evidence before spend	Phased — matches current budget signal	Fast — front-loaded
Year 1 cost	Low, reallocated budget	Medium, reallocated + uplift	High, new ring-fenced fund
Statutory ambition	None in Years 1–5	Explored from Year 4–5	Statute-track from Year 1
Risk profile	Low risk, slower results	Moderate, balanced risk	Higher risk, less pilot evidence
Best suited to	Constrained fiscal years	Current trajectory	Capturing 2026 momentum

This report favours Option B as the pragmatic default, applying Option C's pace in areas where credible evidence already exists (professional and grassroots football, rugby), and Option A's discipline — pilot and evaluate before scaling — in genuinely untested areas such as youth-justice diversion and disability provision.

11. Beyond Five Years: A Longer-Term Trajectory

A five-year plan establishes practice; it rarely closes a 27-point participation gap or shifts national health outcomes. The evidence on preventative spend consistently shows that its largest returns arrive on a ten-to-twenty-year horizon. A credible strategy therefore needs to say what happens after Year 5, even in outline, so that early decisions are not accidentally optimised for a five-year window at the expense of the destination.

Years 6–10: Consolidate and legislate

- Move cross-portfolio co-financing from a voluntary annual arrangement to a statutory footing — a Scottish Sport and Wellbeing Act, in the spirit of Finland's Sports Act, defining 'adequate provision' and setting minimum standards local authorities must meet.
- Fully mainstream GP social prescribing of sport-based activity as a standard NHS Scotland care pathway, rather than a scheme confined to pilot areas.
- Set an explicit ambition to materially close the deprivation participation gap identified in Section 5, from around 27 percentage points towards single digits, with progress tracked publicly year on year.

- Mature the sports diplomacy framework from tournament-linked missions into standing bilateral partnerships on trade, research and development cooperation.
- Extend multi-year commissioning (Section 10, Option B/C) from pilot programmes to the default model for all preventative sport investment.

10–20 years: A generational shift

- Public health payoff: a generation that grew up inside an integrated sport, health and education system reaching adulthood with measurably better outcomes — visible in reduced NHS demand for lifestyle-related disease and lower criminal-justice contact among cohorts who passed through youth-diversion sport programmes.
- Institutional permanence: sport funding treated within the same statutory and fiscal category as core public health and education infrastructure, insulated from single-year political cycles.
- International reference status: Scotland recognised internationally as a reference case for sport-for-development policy, exporting its methodology and community-coaching expertise as part of the knowledge economy rather than as goodwill alone.
- Demographic resilience: sport infrastructure contributing directly to two structural, decades-long challenges — an ageing population (through walking football and older-adult participation) and rural depopulation (through community sport hubs as anchor institutions).

Horizon	Ambition	Key institutional milestone	Success indicator
Years 1–5	Establish and test	Cross-portfolio governance; pilots; evaluation framework	Dashboard published; pilots evaluated
Years 6–10	Consolidate and legislate	Statutory footing; NHS pathway mainstreamed	Participation gap narrowing; multi-year commissioning is the norm
Years 10–20	Institutionalise and lead internationally	Sport treated as core public infrastructure in law and fiscal planning	Measurable health-inequality gains; recognised international model

Risks to the long-term vision

- Political churn: a change of government or minister could deprioritise a strategy that lacks statutory or cross-party lock-in — an argument for legislating the framework once the five-year evidence base is strong enough to support it.
- Fiscal shocks: a downturn could force a reversion to single-year budgeting; multi-year commissioning commitments should include an explicit protection mechanism for programmes already mid-cycle.
- Over-reliance on football: football's scale makes it the obvious anchor, but a genuinely multi-sport ecosystem is needed to reach groups football does not, particularly in disability sport and some minority communities.
- Measurement fatigue: without independent oversight, SROI reporting can drift from evidence towards advocacy; the framework in Section 8 should be reviewed periodically by a body independent of the sports sector itself.
- Silo reversion: without a statutory or fiscal lock-in by Year 6–10, cross-portfolio co-financing arrangements are vulnerable to reverting to single-portfolio budgeting once the initial political impetus fades.

- Continued baseline erosion: the current trajectory of local authority culture and leisure cuts (Section 3) means the starting base this strategy builds from is still shrinking; without an early floor on core provision, later cross-portfolio investment risks topping up a much smaller and less resilient system than the one that exists today.

12. Priority Questions: Strategic Q&A

This section sets out short, direct answers to possible strategic questions raised in developing this report. They are included to make the report's underlying reasoning explicit and testable, rather than leaving it implicit in the recommendations alone.

If the Christie Commission (2011) established the case for prevention, why is Scotland still having the same conversation?

The Christie Commission diagnosed the problem precisely — it found that an estimated 40–45% of public spending in Scotland went on 'failure demand', reactive spending that a preventative approach could have avoided — and recommended new statutory duties on public bodies with a presumption in favour of preventative action. But it did not solve the mechanics of funding the transition: who pays the double-running costs, and who is legally required to act. Those recommended statutory duties were largely never made binding in law, so the diagnosis stuck while the enforcement mechanism did not.

What gives Ministers and public bodies enough confidence to invest, and how much evidence is enough for action?

In practice the bar is not proof to a research-trial standard. Confidence tends to require three things together: a credible, attributable reasonable cost-avoidance case that names which budget benefits; evidence drawn from a scale larger than a small pilot; and a funding route that does not simply add pressure to an already stretched budget. Waiting indefinitely for conclusive evidence is itself a decision, given that acute spending routinely proceeds on a considerably weaker evidence base.

Which barriers are actually structural, and which reflect culture, incentives or underused permissions?

Structural barriers include the absence of a statutory floor for sport provision, the lack of a cross-portfolio budget mechanism, and short local government funding cycles. Cultural and incentive-based barriers include risk-averse commissioning and professional silos in which health, justice and sport rarely co-design programmes together. A further category is simply underused permissions: Community Planning Partnerships already have legal scope to pool budgets across agencies, and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 gives communities participation-request rights that are rarely exercised in relation to sport and leisure. Several apparent barriers are less about what is legally possible than about what has not yet been attempted.

How can community voice and lived experience sit alongside quantitative evidence without weakening accountability?

Lived experience is best used to answer 'what' and 'why' — design choices, barriers to access, what would make people engage — while quantitative data answers 'whether it worked' and 'was it worth it'. Co-design panels should have clearly defined decision rights over what they can and cannot change, operating inside a

standard outcomes-measurement framework, so that qualitative insight shapes delivery without displacing the evidence base that accountability for public money depends on.

Why do proven programmes struggle to move from pilot activity to multi-year commissioning and scale?

Pilots are typically funded from short-term, discretionary innovation budgets rather than core service budgets. When that funding ends, there is usually no institutional owner obliged to mainstream the programme, and evaluation evidence tends to arrive after the relevant budget decision has already been made — so even a successful pilot often restarts the funding case from zero rather than building on what has already been proven.

How can football and other sports contribute to health, community safety and stronger communities without overstating what sport can deliver?

Two facts frame an honest position. First, Fraser of Allander Institute analysis found that Scottish professional football supported 14,315 full-time-equivalent jobs and contributed £820 million in GVA to the Scottish economy in 2023–24 — real, measurable economic and platform value. Second, SPICe’s 2025 briefing on the 2022 Scottish Household Survey found that only 37% of people in Scotland’s most deprived areas participate in sport and physical activity, against 64% in the least deprived areas — meaning sport currently reflects and reinforces inequality rather than automatically correcting it. Together these facts point to a conditional claim, not an unconditional one: sport helps when it is deliberately designed, targeted and integrated with services, and does not produce social good simply by virtue of people taking part.

Should Scotland think less about funding sport and more about investing through it — or both?

Both, and in sequence. ‘Funding sport’ — facilities, access and workforce — is the floor: without it there is no functioning base to invest through. ‘Investing through sport’ — cross-portfolio, outcomes-linked funding from health, justice and education — is the layer built on top for targeted programmes. Pursuing the investment layer while allowing the funding floor to keep eroding, which Section 3 shows is the current trajectory, simply gives cross-portfolio investment a smaller and less resilient base to build on each year.

13. Recommendations

Short term (Years 1–5)

1. Adopt a national Sport for Social Good — Moving Scotland Forward strategy.
2. Establish cross-portfolio governance chaired at senior government level.
3. Select an implementation option from Section 10 — Option B is recommended as the default, blended with elements of A and C by policy area.
4. Develop a consistent Scottish social-value and evaluation framework for sport, building on existing SROI work from Scottish Rugby and the Scottish FA.
5. Use football as the largest scalable platform while maintaining a genuinely multi-sport approach.
6. Develop formal links between community sport, primary care and social prescribing where evidence supports them.
7. Move successful preventative sport programmes onto multi-year, not annual, commissioning cycles by Year 3–4.

8. Target investment towards participation and outcome inequalities identified in Section 5, rather than simply maximising aggregate participation.
9. Launch a Scottish Sports Diplomacy and International Engagement framework that builds on the visibility generated by Scotland's 2026 World Cup campaign and the possibility of the 2035 Women's World Cup coming to the UK and Scotland.
10. Publish an annual Sport for Social Good dashboard covering health, social, education, justice, economic and international outcomes from Year 1.

Long term (Year 5 and beyond)

11. Legislate a statutory footing for local sport provision — a Scottish Sport and Wellbeing Act — targeted for Years 6–8.
12. Fully mainstream GP social prescribing of sport into standard NHS Scotland care pathways.
13. Institutionalise the cross-portfolio co-financing formula in fiscal planning rather than annual negotiation.
14. Build standing international sports-diplomacy partnerships beyond tournament cycles.
15. Extend the annual dashboard into a rolling 20-year outcome-tracking framework, with an explicit target to close the deprivation participation gap.

14. Conclusion

Scotland does not lack sporting infrastructure or evidence of social value. The strategic gap is integration: sport can help government deliver prevention, health, education, justice, equality, community and international objectives, but funding and governance remain largely organised in silos, and ambition is too often scoped to a single spending review rather than to the timescale over which prevention actually pays off.

The opportunity is to move from funding sport because sport is valuable, to investing in sport because it helps Scotland achieve wider national outcomes — and to be explicit that this is a multi-decade undertaking with a deliverable first phase. Football should be central because of its exceptional scale and reach, within a broader multi-sport ecosystem that reaches the people football does not.

The 2026 sporting moment — the men's national team's first World Cup campaign in 28 years, the growth of the women's game, and the additional £40 million committed to the 2026–27 sport budget — should not be allowed to fade into memory now that the tournament is over. It should be used to establish a framework spanning five, ten and twenty years, in which sport becomes recognised as genuine national infrastructure: local enough to build trust, large enough to scale, and international enough to strengthen Scotland's influence.

15. One-Page Ministerial Briefing

Decision required

Agree in principle to develop a cross-portfolio Sport for Social Good — Moving Scotland Forward framework for Scotland, spanning an initial five-year delivery phase and a longer-term trajectory to Year 20.

Why now?

Scotland faces persistent inequalities, pressure on public services, and a longstanding policy commitment to prevention that has proven difficult to fund in practice. Sport already reaches communities at scale and can contribute to health, wellbeing, education, justice, equality, economic and international objectives. The additional £40 million committed to the 2026–27 sport budget, and the visibility and goodwill generated by Scotland’s 2026 World Cup campaign, create a window to build a stronger national approach — one that needs to be used quickly, before that goodwill dissipates now the tournament has concluded.

Core proposition

Treat sport as infrastructure for delivering wider government outcomes — not simply as a leisure expenditure — through a phased five-year delivery plan with an explicit route to statutory footing thereafter.

Why football?

Football has exceptional domestic reach and international visibility. Fraser of Allander Institute research estimates £820 million in GVA and 14,315 FTE jobs from Scottish professional football in 2023–24. Its community-club network provides a scalable platform for social outcomes, provided it sits within a wider multi-sport strategy.

What should government do?

- Choose a delivery pace for Years 1–5 from the three options set out in Section 10 (Foundational, Balanced or Accelerated).
- Establish cross-portfolio governance involving Finance, Health, Justice, Education, Communities, Economy and International Affairs.
- Create common standards for social value and outcome measurement, building on existing sport-specific SROI evidence.
- Pilot shared investment in community sport in selected places and priority populations, moving proven programmes to multi-year commissioning.
- Commit, in principle, to a statutory footing for sport provision by Year 6–8, subject to the evidence generated in Years 1–5.
- Develop a sports diplomacy framework linking football and other sports with trade, development, research and international engagement.

Strategic outcome

A Scotland that uses sport deliberately, over both a five-year delivery phase and a generational timescale, to build a healthier, fairer, safer more connected and more internationally influential country.

Evidence note: This report draws on publicly available source material. Figures attributed to the Fraser of Allander Institute, the Scottish Household Survey / SPICe briefing, Audit Scotland’s October 2025 ‘Spotlight on culture and leisure services’ report, and the EKOS ‘Review of Leisure and Culture Services in Scotland’ (2024, commissioned by Community Leisure UK, Creative Scotland and sportscotland) were all checked against publicly available sources at the time of writing. Figures attributed to individual sports bodies (for example Scottish Rugby’s SROI report and club-reported community-trust impact figures) reflect those organisations’ own published estimates and are presented as such, not as independently verified national statistics. References to the 2026 FIFA World Cup reflect the tournament’s actual outcome: Scotland qualified for their first finals since 1998, beat Haiti 1–0, then lost to Morocco and Brazil to finish third in Group C and were eliminated at the group stage. The diplomatic and economic recommendations in Sections 9, 10 and

15 concern converting the visibility generated by that campaign into lasting relationships, not sporting progression in the tournament itself. Academy of Sport research reports. Edinburgh University research reports and consultancies in sport can be found on the University of Edinburgh Academy of Sport website.

Grant.Jarvie@ed.ac.uk

University of Edinburgh