

Cycling UK briefing – Scottish Parliament election 2026

Paths to green spaces for better health

Scotland is known for its world-class landscapes and its progressive access rights, yet too many people still struggle to reach nature and even local greenspaces without relying on a car. While many communities live close to coastlines, woodlands, fields or parks, poor or poorly maintained paths mean these spaces may as well be miles away. Improving access to nature is not only a matter of recreation, it is also central to public health, environmental justice and equitable mobility.

Cycling UK's manifesto ask

The next Scottish Government should deliver:

- **Funding for local authorities to maintain core paths and the rights of way network.** We support calls for a £50m paths fund proposed by Scotland's Outdoor Recreation Alliance.

Context

Scotland's countryside, parks and greenspaces are among its greatest assets, and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 provides world-leading access rights. [61% of Scots](#) visit these outdoor greenspaces each week but of these visits only 11% are cycled. Off-road cycling, on paths, trails or tracks, accounts for half of the cycled trips into greenspace which shows that people want to cycle away from the road.

Core paths and rights of way provide essential access for walking, cycling, horse riding and wheeling. However, anecdotal evidence and local reports show that often these routes urgently require maintenance, barrier removal or improved connectivity so that people can access them and experience the benefits.

Evidence and Impact

- **Health and wellbeing:** A substantial and growing body of evidence shows that spending time in nature improves physical and mental health. Studies repeatedly link access to green space with reduced stress, increased physical activity, improved cardiovascular health and better overall wellbeing. Access to nature is a preventative health measure that can reduce long-term pressures on the NHS.

The [GreenHealth project](#) in Scotland found that local green space is associated with lower self-reported stress levels and better mental wellbeing, especially in more deprived communities. Furthermore, people using natural environments for physical activity had a lower risk of poor

mental health compared to those using non-natural environments (e.g., gyms).

- Economic value: Scotland's National, Walking and Cycling Network, which includes Scotland's Great Trails, the National Cycle Network and Scottish Canals towpaths has a total of 6,879km of paths and routes. [NatureScot estimated](#) that in 2019 users spent almost £2 billion and supported around 27,500 jobs.
- Inequalities in access: Adults in the [most deprived areas](#) are less likely to live within a five-minute walk of green or blue space (62%) than those in more affluent areas (around 70%). People in lower-income neighbourhoods are less likely to have safe, high-quality routes to local greenspaces. This disparity reinforces health inequalities, limits active travel and reduces opportunities for outdoor play and exercise.
- Improvement and maintenance: Many councils lack the resources to maintain core paths and rights of way, leading to overgrown, eroded or impassable routes. Scotland's Outdoor Recreation Alliance has calculated that a [£50 million paths fund](#), over 5 years, would allow councils to bring critical routes back into good condition and expand access where gaps exist.

Conclusion

Improving path networks would help more people walk, wheel and cycle directly from their front door into Scotland's countryside and local nature hotspots. Making everyday access to green space easy and safe is an investment in health, climate resilience and social equality. The next Scottish Government should provide dedicated funding for councils to maintain and improve these routes.