



Rural Support Plan 2026-2031

Rural – Scotland – June 2026

Reshaping farm support

Introduction

The Scottish Government published the first Rural Support Plan 2026-2031 (the Plan) in March 2026, as required under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024. The Plan provides a statutory five-year framework setting out how agricultural support will be structured, delivered, and monitored during the transition from legacy EU Common Agricultural Policy arrangements to Scotland's new four-tier support framework.

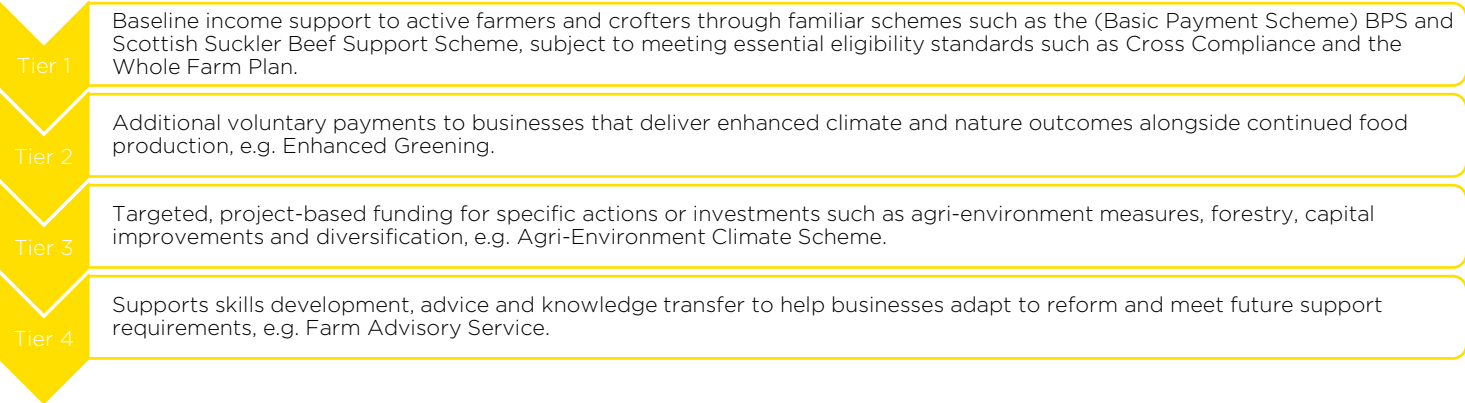
In brief

The Plan establishes a clear structure for agricultural support in Scotland from March 2026 to March 2031, centred on a four-tier framework comprising base support, enhanced payments, targeted schemes, and complementary skills and advisory support. The Plan aims to:

- Maintain baseline income support for active farmers and crofters, providing financial stability during the reform period.
- Introduce proportionate environmental conditionality, including Whole Farm Plans and Enhanced Greening Measures.
- Incentivise delivery of climate mitigation and nature restoration outcomes alongside food production.
- Support rural business resilience and diversification, including forestry, agritourism and food and drink processing.
- Build capability through skills, advice and knowledge transfer, preparing businesses for longer-term reform.

The overall farm support budget is fixed in cash terms, so real support levels will decline over time due to inflation. With approximately 70% of the support delivered through direct payments, the Plan gradually shifts the emphasis towards outcome-based delivery, with more substantive changes anticipated from 2030 onwards.

Four-tier system:



Direct support

Under the Plan, direct support is delivered primarily through Tier 1 (base) and Tier 2 (enhanced) payments, which together account for approximately 70% of total rural support funding. Tier 1 continues to provide income support to active farmers and crofters, initially through BPS and associated legacy schemes, with eligibility subject to meeting Essential Standards, including Cross Compliance and participation in the Whole Farm Plan. Tier 2 provides additional direct payments for businesses that choose to undertake enhanced measures delivering climate mitigation and nature restoration outcomes, integrated alongside ongoing food production. The Scottish Government has committed to maintaining a flat cash budget of around £677 million per year within the four-tier framework, providing certainty to 2030 while gradually shifting the emphasis towards environmental delivery, with any changes introduced incrementally to avoid cliff edges in support.

Environmental conditionality

Environmental conditionality in the Plan is applied primarily through the essential standards required for Tier 1 base support and expanded through Tier 2 enhanced support. Access to base direct payments is conditional on compliance with existing Cross Compliance requirements, including Statutory Management Requirements and Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions, which cover issues such as animal health and welfare, soil protection, water quality and habitat protection. Since 2025, participation in the Whole Farm Plan

has become a core eligibility requirement, with businesses required to complete at least two audits or plans from a defined set, including soil analysis, carbon auditing and biodiversity assessment.

Specific environmental protections are set out in the Plan. New restrictions on peatlands and wetlands have been introduced under Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) rules, prohibiting activities that would degrade soil carbon and recognised carbon stores. From 2026, Enhanced Greening requirements are phased in under Tier 2, requiring farms with more than 15 hectares of arable land to dedicate 5% of land to Ecological Focus Areas, increasing to 7% from 2027, strengthening the link between conditionality and land managed for climate and nature outcomes. The Plan makes clear that these conditions will be applied incrementally and proportionately, with further refinement co-designed with the sector ahead of more comprehensive reforms expected beyond 2030.

Climate change

Climate change mitigation and adaptation are formal strategic outcomes of the Plan and are being delivered directly through agricultural support conditions and payments. Currently, climate action is primarily implemented through Tier 1 essential standards, including mandatory participation in the Whole Farm Plan, which requires businesses to complete audits such as soil analysis, carbon assessment and nutrient management planning. These requirements are now established as the baseline for accessing direct payments.

From 2025-26, climate delivery has been strengthened through scheme-specific changes, most notably the revised eligibility criteria under the Scottish Suckler Beef Support Scheme, which introduce calving-interval conditions to reduce the emissions intensity of beef production. In parallel, cross compliance rules have been tightened to protect peatlands and wetlands, restricting activities that would damage key carbon stores on agricultural land.

Looking ahead, the Plan confirms that Tier 2 enhanced support will play an increasing role from 2026 onwards, with Enhanced Greening requirements requiring larger arable businesses to manage 5% of land as Ecological Focus Areas, rising to 7% from 2027. Further climate-related measures covering fertiliser efficiency, slurry and manure management, and machinery emissions are expected to be developed progressively, with clearer, more explicit requirements scheduled for post-2030 reforms rather than during the current plan period.

Nature restoration

From 2026 onwards, nature outcomes are increasingly supported through Tier 2 enhanced measures, including Enhanced Greening requirements that require larger arable businesses to manage a defined proportion of land for environmental benefit. These measures are intended to increase habitat provision, improve ecological connectivity and support landscape-scale nature recovery while remaining integrated within productive farming systems.

More targeted nature restoration is delivered through Tier 3 elective schemes, including the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme and the Forestry Grant Scheme, which support habitat creation, woodland and agroforestry establishment, species-specific interventions, and landscape-scale environmental projects. The Plan confirms that, over time, a growing share of funding will be directed toward climate and nature outcomes, with more explicit and outcome-driven requirements expected to be developed through co-design as part of future Rural Support Plans beyond 2030.

Rural development and diversification

Rural development and diversification under the Plan are delivered mainly through Tier 3 elective support, which targets business sustainability, value-adding activity and diversification beyond primary agricultural production. Current support includes funding for forestry and agroforestry, agri-environment activity, capital investment, and small-scale business development, alongside specific schemes supporting food and drink processing, agritourism, and crofting-related investment. These measures are intended to strengthen rural economies and improve the long-term resilience of farms and estates, rather than provide blanket income support.

Additionally, Tier 4 (complementary) focuses on enabling diversification through advice, skills, training and capacity building, rather than direct payments. This includes support through the Farm Advisory Service, knowledge transfer activities, new entrant and small-producer initiatives, and community-led rural development programmes. The Plan confirms that diversification will remain a priority as agricultural reform progresses, with future Rural Support Plans expected to place greater emphasis on innovation, collaboration, and locally led economic activity, particularly in rural and island areas.

Skills, advice and knowledge transfer

Skills, advice and knowledge transfer under the Plan are delivered through Tier 4 (complementary) and are explicitly designed to enable delivery of future support requirements, rather than to generate direct outcomes in their own right.

During the 2026-2031 plan period, Tier 4 supports uptake of sustainable and regenerative practices through structured advice, training and peer-to-peer learning, delivered primarily via the Farm Advisory Service and knowledge transfer and innovation funding. This support underpins compliance with Tier 1 and Tier 2 requirements, including the Whole Farm Plan. It is explicitly linked to the Plan's commitment to a just transition, ensuring businesses have the capacity to respond to reform before conditions are tightened.

From 2028, the Plan commits to developing an enhanced Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) to improve coordination among advisors, research institutions, education providers, and industry. AKIS is framed as a system reform rather than a grant programme, to improve how knowledge is generated, shared and applied across Scottish agriculture. The Plan makes clear that Tier 4 activity is a

prerequisite for more outcome-driven support models expected to emerge beyond 2030, rather than an optional or peripheral element of reform.

Monitoring, evaluation and policy delivery

Monitoring and evaluation under the Plan are statutory requirements and form the primary mechanism for adjusting agricultural support during and after the 2026-2031 plan period. The Scottish Government has confirmed that 2025 data will act as the baseline against which all progress is measured, with delivery assessed through both ongoing implementation monitoring and formal evaluation processes required under the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024.

An impact monitoring framework, due to be published in 2026, will track progress against the Plan's five strategic outcomes using trend-based indicators aligned to the Strategic Outcomes Framework rather than fixed targets. During the plan period, monitoring will report on scheme uptake, payment levels, geographic and sectoral distribution of support, and delivery against tier-specific objectives. In addition to continuous delivery monitoring, the Plan commits to targeted early evaluations where schemes are amended, or new requirements are introduced, alongside tier-level and Plan-wide ex-post evaluations at the end of the 2026-2031 period. Evidence from these processes will directly inform the design and funding balance of the 2031-2036 Rural Support Plan, with the Government explicitly ruling out significant policy shifts in the period that are not supported by monitoring evidence.

Conclusion

The Plan establishes a cautious approach to agricultural reform, prioritising stability and continuity through to the end of the decade while laying the foundations for more outcome-driven support beyond 2030. For most businesses, the immediate impact is not wholesale change, but a gradual tightening of expectations around eligibility, evidence and demonstrable activity, particularly through the Whole Farm Plan and emerging enhanced requirements.

While the Plan avoids abrupt redistribution of funding during the 2026-2031 period, it makes clear that future support will increasingly favour land that is actively managed and able to deliver multiple outcomes, including sustainable food production, climate mitigation and nature restoration. The significance of the four-tier framework, therefore, lies less in short-term financial shifts and more in how it reshapes decision-making around land use, investment and long-term business planning.

For landowners, estates and their advisers, the key consideration is whether current management structures, data, skills and advisory engagement are sufficient to remain eligible and competitive as requirements evolve. Businesses that engage early with enhanced measures and capability-building support are likely to be better positioned as monitoring evidence begins to influence scheme design and funding priorities heading into the next Rural Support Plan period.



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