

# Stronger Communities

Addressing Scotland's 21st century divides

**Preliminary report**

June 2025



**Local** recovery  
Supporting Scotland's Communities



# Foreword

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Over recent years, Local Recovery has worked to support Scotland's communities in delivering their aspirations and bringing the cause of local decision-making to government – all while helping to deliver change at a local level.

Throughout this time, we have aimed to find a practical approach to policy issues. In the run-up to the last UK general election, we made pragmatic proposals for how the next UK Government could support Scotland's communities – and were pleased to see a level of consensus emerge across the main political parties on a way forward.

*Stronger Communities* is a new programme of work where Local Recovery will actively seek to address some of the pressing issues in Scotland's society. We will be engaging far and wide – and seeking steps to build positive change and stronger, more sustainable, communities.

So far, a great deal of Local Recovery's work has been focused on supporting participation – which has been key to our grassroots approach to community activism. However we are aware that real barriers to participation and inclusion remain a day-to-day reality in modern Scotland.

In looking in this series at faith, ethnicity and culture we will address some of the most fundamental needs of groups at risk of marginalisation – of feeling safe and included as part of our society.

We look forward to working with other organisations, with the hope of providing a framework for communities, local institutions and government to cooperate on creating communities in Scotland that work for all.



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## About Local Recovery

Local Recovery was established in 2022 as a non-profit grassroots campaign, dedicated to revitalising communities across Scotland and advocating for local involvement in the decisions that affect people across Scotland's villages, towns and cities.

One of Local Recovery's core missions has been supporting the creation of strong, cohesive communities that are able to advocate for their own priorities. We believe that, in harnessing the power of local, Scotland's communities can drive real and enduring change for the better.

As a politically non-partisan organisation, Local Recovery works with stakeholders across political and societal lines to achieve that meaningful, community-led change. We engage with government at all levels and have previously outlined policy proposals focusing on issues of relevance to communities and local democracy. We are positive about government acting to support and enable communities to address their own challenges.

Local Recovery is led by an advisory board of ambassadors selected from a range of backgrounds including business, academia and community campaigning. The campaign also includes an active and engaged supporter network, with thousands of signed-up supporters operating in each of Scotland's 32 local authority areas.

To find out more about how Local Recovery operates, please visit our website at [www.local-recovery.com](http://www.local-recovery.com) or get in touch directly by emailing [info@local-recovery.com](mailto:info@local-recovery.com).

## Background

This preliminary report will look at the first steps in Local Recovery's *Stronger Communities* programme of work and provide an overview of areas which this work is likely to cover.

As part of the *Stronger Communities* programme, Local Recovery will be considering the barriers to more cohesive, sustainable and inclusive communities – as well as the social issues, divides and long-term problems that are holding communities back.

This process will not only explore and highlight these issues, but – at its conclusion – will aim to produce practical, evidence-led solutions, addressed to government and civil society.

As one of our first topic areas, *Scotland's 21st century divides* will start by looking at the continuing role of faith, cultural and ethnic divisions in Scotland and how they continue to impact on people's daily lives and how they relate to their communities.

As part of this, we will consider impact of Scotland's changing demographic make-up and increased religious and ethnic diversity and how civic structures and communities reflect this change. Increasingly, our understanding of liberal democracy must be one that considers common bonds of citizenship across these divides and one that embraces common values.

We will look at emerging issues – where divisions are growing and deepening rather than receding – and the lessons that can be drawn from previous attempts to promote inclusion and tackle prejudice.

## Faith, culture and ethnicity

Scotland's relationship with communities of minority faiths and ethnic backgrounds has been a complex and often volatile one. Much of Scotland's history has revolved around religion and many of its conflicts have had faith-based differences at their heart.

Religion has also played a foundational role in communities in the past and retains an active role in civic institutions and the state.

The religious and cultural background of Scotland's population has shifted considerably over its history, from the Reformation to migration of Roman Catholic populations from Ireland and

mainland Europe, refugees escaping religious oppression in other parts of the world to 21st century global economic migration bringing new communities with relatively short histories in Scotland.

There have often been discussions about how migrant communities integrate into mainstream Scottish and British culture, the extent by which our society is comfortable with being multicultural – and the processes of assimilation that have taken place in the past. For some more established migrant communities, religious differences may be the main remaining marker – while others may have retained a greater intergenerational appreciation of their cultural heritage.

Often the markers of difference are difficult to define and precisely categorise. Sectarian violence in the west of Scotland often saw religion overlap with politics, ethnic background and sporting or other allegiances. No individual identity was decisive. So too, following the 7 October 2023 terrorist attack in Israel and the conflict in the wider region, Scotland's Jewish population have faced higher levels of antisemitism – with prejudice on ethnicity, religion, presumed national allegiances and politics often conflated.

As part of the *Stronger Communities* programme we make proposals for how our communities can operate from a starting point of inclusion and how we can prepare for greater local democracy that reflects the needs of every group in our society.

### **Public sector approach**

We will look to explore the public sector approach to minority communities in Scotland and how public bodies work to ensure their democratic participation in the structures of local and central government.

We will look at the weaknesses in coordination on approaches to issues of faith and ethnicity at different tiers of government – and by different agencies at different levels.

The functions of these public authorities are underpinned by a common UK legal framework. The Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010 binds public bodies. Other bodies also provide a supportive role, including the Equality and Human Rights Commission – which was

established in 2006 with a remit across Great Britain – and the Scottish Human Rights Commission, which has operated under the aegis of the Scottish Parliament since 2008.

Both the UK and Scottish Governments have designated ministers for equalities issues. The Scottish Government's Minister for Equalities supports the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice with a broad remit. The UK Government's equivalent position, currently styled the Minister for Women and Equalities, has been held since 1997 by a minister of Cabinet rank.

We will address whether these structures have been responsive – and whether there is scope for greater harmonisation on these issues.

In terms of representing communities, the Scottish Parliament's model of Cross-Party Groups (CPGs), mirroring the All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) in the UK Parliament, have been a useful forum for communities in Scotland. Regional CPGs (eg, the CPG on China, the CPG on Building Bridges with Israel, CPG on Ukraine) have often had close links with community groups based in Scotland, sometimes associated with diaspora populations.

### **Criminal justice approach: tackling hate crime**

The Scottish Government has pursued a number of approaches to tackling hate crime in Scotland. As a first principle, it is vital to participation that groups within Scotland feel free from the threat of crime and violence and that they feel able to engage in the community without being victimised or abused.

There has been an identified reduction in overt sectarian violence in Scotland – usually associated with the Protestant/Roman Catholic divide, but little clear progress on prejudicially aggravated forms of violence and criminality.

The controversy over the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012, later repealed, which was passed against united opposition in the Scottish Parliament, had a chilling effect on hate crime legislation. The 2012 Act was criticised for its focus on football supporters, but also for the broader perceived impact on civil liberties.

Consequently, Lord Bracadale’s independent review of hate crime legislation in 2018 formed the basis for a renewed approach and addressed the need for new legislation to recognise the impact of hate crime in Scotland.

The resultant Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 came into effect on 1 April 2024 following extended political discussion. The Act takes into account a variety of characteristics which can provide aggravation to offences including prejudice based on age, disability, race (including colour, nationality, citizenship, ethnic or national origins), religion (including perceived religious affiliation), sexual orientation, transgender identity and variation in sex characteristics.

One of the areas of controversy that remains with the legislation has been the balance of civil liberties issues and freedom of speech, in addition a perceived broad and subjective scope of offences under the Act.

It will likely require time before the legal consequences of the Act can be assessed – and whether it has a positive impact on policing and prosecution of hateful conduct. It will be vital that the Act is able to deal proportionately with forms of hateful conduct and across a variety of potential victims.

### **Further steps**

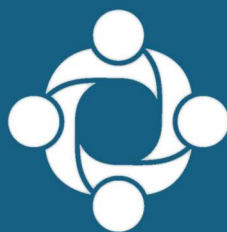
As part of the *Stronger Communities* programme, Local Recovery aims to engage actively across communities, particularly those groups highlighting pressing issues with inclusion.

Where possible, we will look to highlight real-world examples and experiences – with a view to provide an evidence-base for action.

We will look at emergent issues of prejudice faced in Scotland – as well as outlining practical steps and recommendations to promote an active approach to community building. In this regard, we aim to consider the importance of education and awareness, the impact of building positive community infrastructure, the adequacy of monitoring and data collection on issues of inclusion and the early impact of criminal justice interventions.







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