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MANIFESTO
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INTRODUCTION

The 2026 ScotlandIS Manifesto is designed to help inform the strategic priorities of government, industry, and academia, providing insight drawn from collaboration across Scotland's vibrant tech ecosystem.

It is intended as a strategic companion to Scotland's key initiatives, including the National Innovation Strategy, the Digital, Data and AI Strategy, and wider innovation and economic strategies, helping ensure that policy, investment, and action are fully aligned with the needs of the sector.

Building on the successes of previous manifestos, this edition highlights the opportunities and challenges facing Scotland's tech sector today, offering clear recommendations to unlock innovation, strengthen digital resilience, and establish an inclusive, globally competitive digital economy. By connecting stakeholders, amplifying insight, and advocating for practical solutions, this Manifesto seeks to drive real, measurable impact across Scotland's digital landscape.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scotland's tech sector stands at a pivotal moment. As we approach the 2026 General Election, the choices made by the next government will determine whether we fully unlock the potential of digital technologies to drive inclusive prosperity, strengthen national resilience, and accelerate our innovative, sustainable, and globally competitive economy. This Manifesto sets out a bold vision for Scotland as a digitally confident nation, where innovation is embedded in every sector, every region is digitally connected, and everyone can participate and thrive in the digital economy.

Drawing on the insights of our members across industry, we outline actionable recommendations for how government can work with the tech ecosystem.

This Manifesto is not just a list of demands. It's a call to action for a new, collaborative approach; one that enables government, industry and society to co-create the future of Scotland's digital economy.

PILLARS OF TRANSFORMATION

Scotland's digital economy is entering a defining period of opportunity. To compete globally, deliver inclusive prosperity, and strengthen national resilience, Scotland must accelerate the development and adoption of technologies that underpin modern, high-growth economies. This section sets out the core pillars of transformation required to achieve that ambition - spanning AI and data innovation, a national culture of creativity and experimentation, the scaling of high-potential tech SMEs and startups, the expansion of world-class digital and data infrastructure, and the development of a future-ready workforce.

Together, these pillars form a strategic framework for unlocking Scotland's full technological potential and ensuring that innovation translates into economic, social, and environmental benefits for every region and community.

AI and Data Innovation

Scotland has an exceptional foundation in AI and data-driven innovation, with world-class universities, pioneering research institutions, and a growing ecosystem of AI startups and scaleups. From the University of Edinburgh's Bayes Centre and The Data Lab to the thriving AI and analytics communities emerging across the central belt and beyond, Scotland is already recognised as a centre of excellence for data science.

AI and advanced analytics are transforming key sectors such as financial services, health and social care, energy, manufacturing, and public services, driving efficiencies, improving decision-making, and creating entirely new business models. With the right investment and strategic coordination, Scotland has the potential to become a global testbed for ethical and applied AI, built on principles of transparency, trust, and inclusion.

By focusing on responsible innovation, Scotland can lead not only in the creation of new technologies, but also in shaping the standards that govern them. This means embedding ethical AI principles in design, strengthening public trust, and ensuring access to high-quality, diverse datasets to fuel innovation.

AI also presents a significant economic opportunity: if scaled effectively, it could contribute billions to Scotland's GDP and support thousands of high-value jobs. In order to achieve this, collaboration between government, academia, and industry must accelerate turning world-leading research into commercially viable, scalable solutions.

Recommendations

- **Position Scotland as a Global AI Testbed:**

  Establish national “AI Demonstrator Zones” in priority sectors such as health, energy, and public services, enabling innovators to pilot trusted, ethical AI solutions at scale.

- **Build a Trusted Data Infrastructure:**

  Invest in interoperable, secure data-sharing frameworks and open data-sets to enable responsible innovation across sectors while safeguarding privacy and ethics.

- **Expand AI Skills and Workforce Development:**

  Develop coordinated AI skills programmes across universities, colleges, and industry, ensuring Scotland’s workforce is equipped for AI integration in every sector.

- **Incentivise Ethical and Responsible AI Adoption:**

  Support SMEs to adopt AI safely through targeted funding, ethical AI tool-kits, and accessible guidance that bridges the gap between innovation and compliance.

- **Strengthen International Collaboration:**

  Promote Scottish AI and data innovation through international partner-ships, trade missions, and joint research projects, showcasing Scotland as a trusted global leader in ethical AI.

Encouraging a Culture of Innovation

Innovation is the engine of long-term economic growth and global competitiveness. Scotland must foster a culture where creativity, experimentation and entrepreneurship are encouraged and rewarded across business, education, public services and communities.

This means supporting risk-taking, enabling cross-sector collaboration, and ensuring that innovation is not the preserve of a few but an expectation across the economy. We must build an innovation mindset from the classroom to the boardroom, underpinned by leadership, investment and mission-led purpose.

Recommendations

- **Embed Innovation Across the Economy:**

  Invest in mission-driven research and development (R&D), simplify access to innovation support, and promote cross-sector collaboration through tech clusters and innovation hubs.

- **National Innovation Mission:**

  Commit to a long-term, cross-government National Innovation Mission backed by increased R&D investment and a single, simplified access point for innovation funding and support for SMEs and startups. Support regional innovation clusters and expand Scotland's network of testbeds and demonstrators to enable real-world experimentation.

Scaling Scotland's Tech SMEs and Startups: Unlocking Global Competitiveness

Scotland has a thriving scaleup and startup ecosystem, with innovative companies emerging across sectors such as digital, cyber security, AI, fintech, healthtech and gaming. Our entrepreneurs are creating cutting-edge products and services, generating high-value jobs, and positioning Scotland as a global hub for digital innovation.

However, many tech SMEs face significant challenges in scaling. Access to growth capital remains limited, with early-stage funding often available but follow-on Series A and B investment inconsistent or fragmented. Support programmes exist, but are often disconnected, making it difficult for companies to navigate the full growth journey from proof-of-concept to global expansion. International market access also remains a barrier, with Scottish tech companies needing stronger pathways to export, connect with multinational clients, and participate in global innovation networks.

Without a coordinated continuum of investment and targeted growth support, Scotland risks losing its most promising companies to other markets. This would not only reduce economic impact and job creation but also weaken Scotland's reputation as a competitive, innovation-led economy. By addressing these gaps, we can ensure that our startups and SMEs reach their full potential, driving growth, exports, and Scotland's global standing.

Recommendations

- **Develop a Coherent Investment Continuum:**

  Establish coordinated funding pathways covering pre-seed to scaleup stages, including public-private co-investment vehicles, venture capital partnerships, and growth-stage grants.

- **Simplify Access to Support:**

  Create a single "front door" for business support, connecting startups and SMEs with tailored advice, mentorship, internationalisation support, and innovation programmes.

- **Enable International Expansion:**

  Facilitate access to overseas markets through trade missions, export-readiness support, and partnerships with global tech clusters.

- **Strengthen Scaleup Ecosystem Infrastructure:**

  Invest in scaleup accelerators, sector-specific innovation hubs, and access to specialist infrastructure such as labs, testbeds, and research facilities.

- **Embed Tech Specialist Support:**

  Provide dedicated advisors who understand the specific challenges of deep tech, AI, cyber security, and other high-growth sectors, helping companies navigate funding, talent, and commercialisation hurdles.

Digital Infrastructure & Data Centre Expansion: Powering Scotland's Future Economy

Scotland's ability to lead in AI, data, cloud services, digital health, fintech, and advanced manufacturing relies on world-class digital infrastructure, and at the core of this infrastructure is resilient, sustainable, high-capacity data centre capability.

Scotland has a unique opportunity to become a major data centre hub, driven by its cool climate, growing renewable energy capacity, strong fibre connectivity, and established digital talent base. Recent investments, including hyperscale and enterprise-grade providers, signal increasing global interest in Scotland as a location for digital infrastructure expansion.

However, Scotland's current data centre ecosystem remains under-developed relative to its potential. High-growth sectors - AI, space, life sciences, fintech, gaming, and cyber security - are already demanding significantly more compute and storage capacity. Without strategic intervention and coordinated investment, Scotland risks losing future investment to countries with stronger infrastructure alignment.

To support economic growth, energy transition goals, and Scotland's wider innovation ambitions, a national strategy for data centre development is essential. This strategy must align planning policy, regulatory frameworks, energy access, sustainability standards, and investment incentives.

With the right conditions, Scotland can position itself as a secure, sustainable, net-zero aligned data infrastructure hub, unlocking jobs, inward investment, and global competitiveness.

Recommendations

- **Accelerate a National Data Centre Strategy:**

  Develop a Scotland-wide strategy for data centre expansion, aligning planning, permitting, energy availability, resilience requirements, and sustainability targets.

- **Enable Sustainable, Low-Carbon Growth:**

  Prioritise access to renewable energy for data centre developments, incentivise heat re-use schemes, and support collaboration between data centre operators, local authorities, and energy providers.

- **Streamline Planning and Regulatory Processes:**

  Introduce a clear, consistent national planning framework for data centres, reducing delays and creating certainty for investors, local authorities, and infrastructure providers.

- **Strengthen Scotland's Digital Resilience:**

  Support investment in distributed data infrastructure, edge computing sites, and improved network redundancy to ensure resilience against increasing cyber, climate, and capacity risks.

- **Promote Scotland as a Data Infrastructure Destination:**

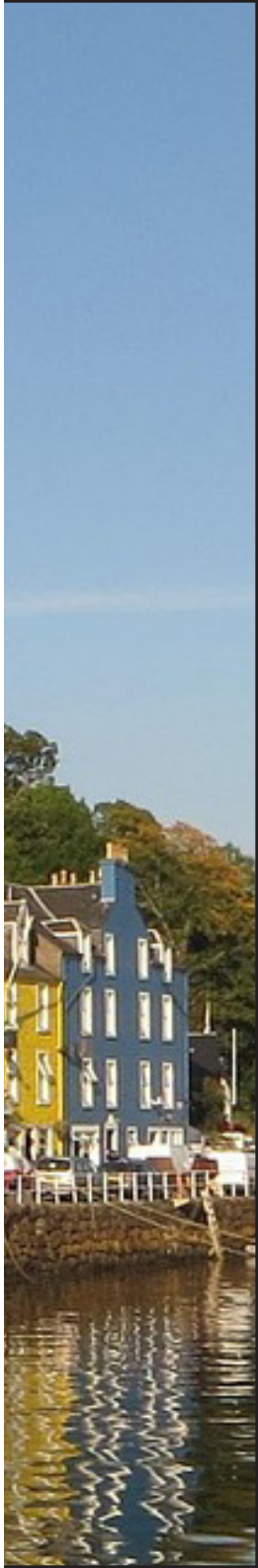
  Launch an international promotional campaign highlighting Scotland's strengths in renewable energy, sustainability, security, and proximity to emerging subsea cable routes.

- **Support Regional Development & Local Opportunity:**

  Encourage data centre siting in regions with available land, grid capacity and economic need, enabling inclusive growth and stimulating new clusters of digital activity.

- **Integrate Data Centres Into Scotland's Innovation Ecosystem:**

  Foster partnerships between operators, universities, innovation hubs, and SMEs to ensure accessible high-performance compute capacity for research, AI development, and commercialisation.



Building Scotland's Future Tech Workforce

Scotland's technology sector is growing rapidly, yet it continues to face a significant shortage of skilled professionals in critical areas such as software engineering, cyber security, data science, AI, digital infrastructure, and emerging technologies. Demand for skilled talent far outpaces supply, with businesses across the country reporting that the lack of digital expertise is the single biggest barrier to innovation, productivity, and growth.

While Scotland's universities and colleges produce highly qualified graduates, there remains a mismatch between academic outputs and industry demand. Too few graduates are leaving education with the applied skills, practical experience, and commercial awareness needed to thrive in fast-moving digital roles. At the same time, the pace of technological change means that lifelong learning and continuous reskilling are no longer optional - they are essential to maintain a competitive, inclusive workforce.

The challenge extends beyond numbers. The tech workforce lacks diversity, with persistent underrepresentation of women, ethnic minorities, and neurodiverse individuals. This not only limits opportunities for talented people but also constrains the diversity of thought and innovation that are vital to solving complex problems. A more inclusive and accessible tech sector would not only benefit Scotland's economy but also ensure that the technologies we develop reflect the needs and values of all communities.

Scotland has the infrastructure to address this through strong partnerships between industry, academia, and government, as well as a network of digital skills initiatives and clusters. To further strengthen talent pipelines, we propose a national STEM placement programme, building on models such as e-Placement Scotland, to give students and early-career talent hands-on experience within leading tech companies, startups, and research institutions across the country. These placements would provide practical skills, mentorship, and industry exposure, ensuring learners are ready to contribute immediately to Scotland's digital economy.

Recommendations

- **Develop a National Digital Workforce Strategy:**

  Create a cross-sector plan to forecast future skills demand, align education with employer needs, and establish clear pathways into tech careers for people of all ages.

- **Enhance Collaboration Between Industry and Education:**

  Strengthen partnerships between employers, universities, and colleges to co-design curricula, embed practical experience, and support the rapid rollout of microcredentials and modular learning.

- **Invest in Reskilling and Upskilling Programmes:**

  Expand access to digital retraining initiatives, especially for mid-career workers transitioning from traditional industries into tech roles.

- **Champion Diversity and Inclusion in Tech:**

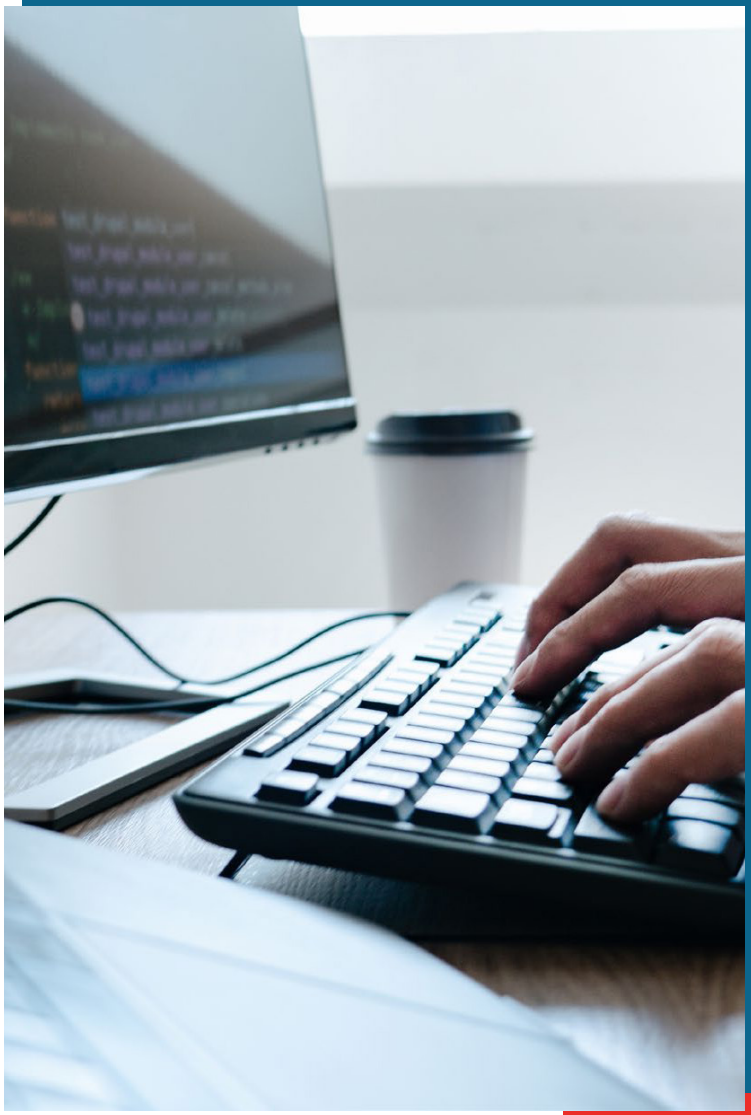
  Build on Scotland's leadership in Women in Tech and wider inclusion initiatives by introducing targeted programmes that support underrepresented groups and strengthen diversity practices within existing organisations. This should include practical support for employers to evaluate and improve their internal culture - such as inclusive leadership training, bias-aware recruitment guidance, and toolkits for creating equitable progression pathways. By combining external programmes with internal capability-building, Scotland can ensure that diversity is embedded not only at the point of entry but throughout workplace structures, contributing to genuinely inclusive, high-performing tech environments.

- **Promote Regional Skills Hubs:**

  Establish regional digital skills hubs in partnership with local authorities, ensuring that talent development extends beyond the central belt and supports economic growth in rural and island communities.

- **Launch a National STEM Placement Programme:**

  Scale up a programme similar to e-Placement Scotland, providing students and early-career talent with hands-on industry experience, mentorship, and exposure to Scotland's leading tech employers, startups, and research institutions. This would strengthen pipelines from education to employment and ensure practical, workforce-ready skills are developed nationwide.



Funding, Policy Fragmentation, and SME-Accessible Procurement

Scotland's tech ecosystem is vibrant, but many SMEs face barriers to scaling due to fragmented funding, short-term policy cycles, and complex public sector procurement. Innovation support is spread across UK and Scottish programmes with differing eligibility, reporting, and application requirements. This fragmentation makes long-term planning, strategic investment, and talent development difficult.

Procurement processes exacerbate these challenges. Current public sector procurement is often risk-averse, lengthy, and biased towards established vendors, making it difficult for SMEs to participate. Early-stage co-design of digital services with government is rare, which slows the adoption of emerging technologies and reduces the diversity of solutions available to public sector organisations. These barriers limit innovation, restrict competition, and hinder Scotland's ability to scale and commercialise its homegrown tech talent.

Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, long-term approach: unifying funding and policy frameworks, simplifying access, and reforming procurement to unlock the potential of SMEs while ensuring government benefits from innovation and agility.

Recommendations

- **Simplify Access to Innovation Funding:**

  Establish a single, coordinated entry point to Scottish innovation programmes, providing clear guidance on eligibility, timelines, and reporting requirements.

- **Introduce Longer-Term, Predictable Funding:**

  Provide multi-year grants and investment programmes to enable strategic growth, R&D, and workforce development.

- **Reform Public Procurement:**

  Make procurement innovation-friendly and SME-accessible by reducing complexity, shortening timelines, and removing bias toward established vendors.

- **Challenge-Led and Dynamic Purchasing Systems:**

  Introduce procurement models that encourage competition, experimentation, and rapid adoption of innovative solutions.

- **Support Early-Stage Co-Design:**

  Foster collaboration between government and SMEs during the design of digital services to accelerate technology adoption and diversify solutions.

- **Mandate Transparency and Simplified Evaluation:**

  Require clear evaluation criteria, simplified tendering processes, and pre-procurement guidance to reduce barriers for smaller companies.

- **Align Policy Across UK and Scottish Programmes:**

  Harmonise eligibility, reporting, and evaluation standards to reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and create a seamless innovation support landscape.

- **Provide Advisory and Mentorship Support:**

  Offer dedicated guidance for SMEs navigating funding, compliance, and procurement, leveraging cluster networks and industry expertise.

HOW WE'LL MEASURE SUCCESS

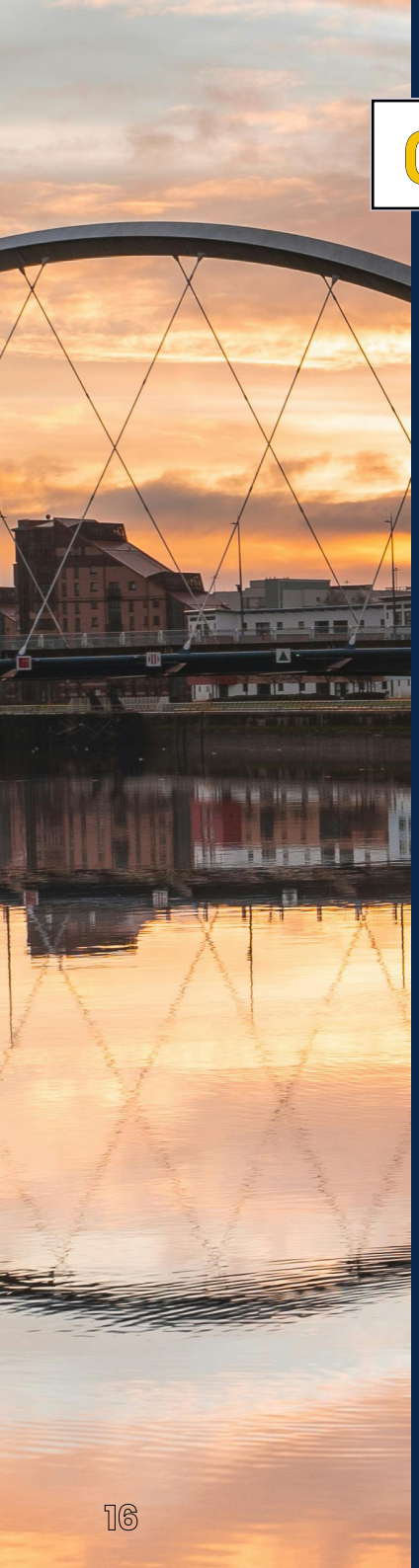
To drive meaningful change, it is essential that progress is tracked transparently and collaboratively. By agreeing on shared goals and indicators, government, industry and academia can work together to monitor Scotland's digital and innovation performance over time.

We believe success should be measured not just by economic outputs, but also by social impact, resilience and inclusivity.

Recommendations

Work with industry to define and report against key performance indicators, such as:

- Growth in digital sector GVA and exports
- Growth and scale of Scottish tech startups and scaleups
- Cyber Essentials accreditation uptake across sectors
- Diversity in tech workforce and founder community
- Innovation adoption across public services and SMEs
- Connectivity access across rural and urban areas



OUR COMMITMENT

As the leading voice for Scotland's digital and tech sector, we are committed to working in partnership with government, academia and industry to deliver the ambitions set out in this manifesto.

We will act as a connector, advocate and enabler, helping to translate vision into action and policy into outcomes.

Our commitments include:

- Convening cross-sector working groups to support delivery of recommendations
- Sharing insight and lived experience from across the tech ecosystem
- Supporting members to adopt responsible innovation and cyber resilience best practices
- Amplifying underrepresented voices to shape inclusive growth
- Facilitating knowledge exchange with international partners
- Continuing to work collaboratively with UK and Scottish Governments to ensure alignment with evolving policy landscapes

We recognise that building a thriving, inclusive and globally competitive tech nation is a shared endeavour, and we are ready to play our part.

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