

SP2026 Manifesto Analysis

Skills and workforce planning

Lighthouse PR

April 2026



Contents

Contents	2
Purpose, scope and method	2
Cross-party consensus.....	3
Broad agreement (four or more parties)	3
Narrower agreement (two to three parties).....	3
Talking points	4
At a glance	7
Scottish Conservatives	8
Scottish Labour.....	9
SNP	9
Scottish Liberal Democrats.....	10
Reform UK Scotland	11
Scottish Greens.....	11

Purpose, scope and method

Scope

This analysis examines what the six main parties contesting the 2026 Scottish Parliament election say about skills, workforce planning and labour supply. It covers apprenticeships and the UK Apprenticeship Levy, college funding and reform, tertiary education, sector and national workforce plans, adult re-skilling, and the labour-supply question including immigration.

Purpose

Rather than look at individual manifestos or the differences between them, I have taken what might be an unconventional approach and looked at commonalities: **where might the parties set aside ideological and tribal politics to work together in the interests of Scotland?**

After all, even if the SNP get a majority it may be a fragile one. The probability remains that throughout or at some point in the parliament, two or more parties will have to work together. That is exactly how the parliament was intended to work. It does on many occasions, but not nearly enough.

There are also a skint public sector and a stagnant economy. We aren't going to solve those issues without more collegiate working.

Method - please read these important notes

I have not done this as paid or even unpaid work for any client. It has been for my own interest and as a contribution to reframing the conversation between the worlds of politics, business and society.

It would not have been humanly possible - for your author at least - to read, digest and cross-reference all of the manifesto content and produce a timely report. Therefore I have used a sophisticated AI tool to help before doing a light-touch review and edit of the most important points. **Both AI and human may have made mistakes. Please do not rely on it as definitive.**

Talking points represent my view and are designed to support further discussion and enquiry.

All page references cite the published PDF page number. Page references are not definitive of a party's whole position - they are signposts to one or more places where policy points are mentioned, not a comprehensive index.

Parties covered: Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Labour, SNP, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Greens and Reform UK Scotland. They are listed in no particular order.

Links to manifestos

- [Scottish Conservatives manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Labour manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [SNP manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Liberal Democrats manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Reform UK Scotland manifesto \(PDF\)](#)
- [Scottish Greens manifesto \(PDF\)](#)

Cross-party consensus

Skills is a policy theme where almost every party accepts the same diagnoses. The system is not keeping pace with demand. Colleges are under-funded. The UK Apprenticeship Levy paid by Scottish employers is not delivering enough for Scottish learners. Construction, health and digital shortages will bite during the housing, net zero and NHS programmes. Beyond those common planks, the manifestos diverge.

Broad agreement (four or more parties)

- **The Scottish skills system is not keeping pace with labour market demand.** Every party frames this as the core problem. The diagnosis cuts across industrial strategy, health, housing and net zero. (Conservatives p.68; Labour p.38; SNP p.19; Lib Dems p.20; Reform p.10; Greens p.24)
- **Colleges are under-funded and need a clearer role.** Labour, Conservatives, Lib Dems, SNP and Greens all propose uplifts or structural commitments. Reform commits to multi-year funding for technical colleges. (Labour p.41, 95; Conservatives p.69-70; Lib Dems p.8, 43-44; SNP p.61; Greens p.38; Reform p.10)
- **Apprenticeship Levy funding should deliver more for Scottish learners.** Different mechanisms: ringfence (Labour), redirect (Conservatives), reorganise (Lib Dems), reboot (Reform), accelerator grant (SNP), new deal (Greens). None of the six publishes how much of the roughly £500m/year paid by Scottish employers actually reaches Scottish apprenticeships today. (Labour p.37-38; Conservatives p.69; Lib Dems p.20; Reform p.10; SNP p.19, 61; Greens p.24)
- **Free university tuition for Scottish domiciled students is retained.** SNP, Labour, Lib Dems, Conservatives and Greens protect it. Only Reform would review university funding. (SNP p.7, 19, 61; Labour p.38; Lib Dems p.20; Conservatives p.69; Greens p.38; Reform p.10)
- **Oil and gas workers need a skills passport.** Five parties back a passport or equivalent to enable movement into renewables and nuclear. The SNP's Just Transition framing, Labour's Energy Skills Passport, the Conservatives' Energy Skills Passport, the Lib Dems' workforce valuation and the Greens' publicly funded retraining all converge on the same outcome. (SNP p.23; Labour p.34; Conservatives p.48; Lib Dems p.73; Greens p.24)

Narrower agreement (two to three parties)

- **Pupils at 14-15 should have vocational pathways.** Conservatives propose formal school-college partnerships; Reform would direct non-university-bound pupils into technical colleges. Others are silent on early vocational entry. (Conservatives p.70; Reform p.10)
- **Sector-specific workforce plans.** Labour proposes 10-year rolling plans across NHS, education and construction. Lib Dems cite a rolling 10-year NHS and care workforce plan. Conservatives commit to new plans for teachers and for health and social care. Reform would train more doctors and nurses. Greens publish an annual Green Jobs and Skills Outlook. SNP commits to a Skilled Scotland plan. (Labour p.15, 20, 48, 68; Lib Dems p.28; Conservatives p.55, 67; Reform p.8; Greens p.24; SNP p.60)
- **Immigration sensitivity.** SNP commits to devolved migration powers and a rural visa pilot; Lib Dems champion immigration sensitive to skills needs; Greens back devolved migration powers and migrant worker rights. Conservatives and Reform emphasise the UK-level approach without new Scottish routes. (SNP p.57; Lib Dems p.83; Greens p.24)

Talking points

Apprenticeship Levy

Scottish employers pay the UK Apprenticeship Levy. The commonly cited figure is in the region of £500m a year. None of the six parties states how much of that actually reaches apprenticeships in Scotland. Without that number, no reform can be evaluated against a baseline.

The proposed fixes point in different directions. Labour would ringfence Scotland's share for skills. The Conservatives would redirect the Levy to expand apprenticeships open to all ages. The Lib Dems would reorganise funding to end cliff edges that deter training providers. Reform would reboot the Levy with 100% invested in apprenticeships linked to colleges. The SNP would introduce an Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant backed by Levy funding. The Greens would launch a New Deal for Apprenticeships with living-wage conditionality. Those are six different mechanisms for six similar claims.

Colleges

College funding is the single line on which all five engaged parties commit. The scale differs. Lib Dems cite a 10% budget increase secured in recent budgets. Labour pledges to fund colleges properly and create Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence plus regional Skills Accelerators. Conservatives would increase college funding to match universities for similar degrees and pay extra for skills-gap subjects. The SNP references an ongoing College Sector reform with funding package in development. Greens focus on governance - reserved councillor seats, fair-work enforcement - rather than headline funding.

Workforce planning

Everyone proposes a workforce plan for something. Labour's statutory Skills Board, the Lib Dems' rolling 10-year NHS and care plan, the SNP's Skilled Scotland plan, the Conservatives' teacher and health workforce plans, Reform's doctor and nurse workforce plan, the Greens' annual Green Jobs and Skills Outlook.

None of these plans is explicitly linked to immigration policy. The arithmetic does not work without overseas recruitment on any realistic trajectory for construction, health and social care, and hospitality.

Labour supply and immigration

Immigration is reserved. That does not stop three parties - SNP, Lib Dems, Greens - from asking for devolved routes or rural visa pilots. The SNP's Displaced Workers Scheme, aimed at those affected by UK immigration changes, addresses the care sector in practice without naming it in scope. The Lib Dems' immigration "sensitivity" is a direction of travel rather than a route. The Greens back devolved migration powers and migrant worker rights.

Conservatives and Reform do not propose new Scottish routes. Neither publishes how Scottish care, construction or hospitality will fill shortages without them.

Tertiary policy

Free tuition for Scottish-domiciled students is retained by five parties. Reform would review. None of the retainers publishes a response to the financial stress reported by universities in successive Audit Scotland reports.

14-15 year old college access

Conservatives would let 14- and 15-year-olds start a college place or apprenticeship instead of mainstream schooling while still meeting core academic standards. Reform would direct young people into trades via technical colleges with multi-year funding. The Greens and SNP are silent on early college entry at scale.

Adult re-skilling and lifelong learning

Reform proposes an Adult Re-Skilling Taskforce. Labour introduces a Digital Skills Passport and short re-skilling courses. Lib Dems back career changers and upskilling. Greens build regional Green Skills Hubs linking colleges, employers and unions. Conservatives' SkillsFuture-inspired adult accounts give every adult a training allowance.

What is missing from most manifestos

A published Scotland-wide figure for Levy paid versus deployed in Scottish apprenticeships. SME capability support for small-employer apprenticeships. Prison learning and training - referenced only briefly by Lib Dems. Careers Information, Advice and Guidance in schools - Labour mentions it, others do not.

Recognition of overseas qualifications - Labour mentions refugee passporting, others silent. STEM take-up at secondary level - largely absent.

At a glance

The table below summarises each party's headline approach to skills and workforce planning.

Theme	Conservatives	Labour	SNP	Lib Dems	Reform	Greens
Apprenticeship Levy	Redirect Levy to expand apprenticeships for all ages	Ringfence Scotland's Levy share for skills	Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant backed by Levy	Reorganise to end cliff edges	Reboot with 100% into apprenticeships linked to colleges	New Deal for Apprenticeships - living wage, no age caps
College funding	Match universities for similar degrees; borrowing powers	Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence; Skills Accelerators	College funding package in development	10% budget uplift won; align to Skills Strategy	Multi-year funding for technical colleges	Governance reform; councillor board seats; fair work
University tuition	Retain free tuition; alternative admissions	Maintain free tuition	Protect free tuition	Maintain free tuition	Review university funding for value	Retain free tuition; fair work conditions
Workforce planning	New plans for teachers, health and care	Statutory Skills Board; 10-year plans NHS/education/construction	Skilled Scotland plan; GP workforce plan	Rolling 10-year NHS and care plan; new Skills Strategy	Workforce plan for doctors and nurses	Annual Green Jobs and Skills Outlook
Immigration and supply	No new Scottish route	Skills passporting for refugees and qualified individuals	Devolved migration powers; rural visa pilot; Displaced Workers Scheme	Immigration sensitive to skills needs	No new Scottish route	Devolve migration powers; review migrant rights
14-15 vocational	Formal school-college partnerships at 14-15	Taster Apprenticeships	Not a headline feature	Foundation apprenticeships at end of school	Direct young people into technical trades	Not a headline feature
Adult re-skilling	SkillsFuture-inspired adult accounts	Digital Skills Passport; short reskilling courses	Expansion of adult learning; digital skills	Support career changers and upskilling	Adult Re-Skilling Taskforce	Regional Green Skills Hubs
Key differentiator	Skills Bill plus university-level college funding	Statutory Skills Board plus Digital Skills Passport	150,000 apprenticeships over Parliament	Reorganised apprenticeship funding; statutory ferry-style college duty	Levy reboot plus Adult Re-Skilling Taskforce plus Education Scotland abolition	Living-wage apprenticeships plus Green Skills Hubs

Scottish Conservatives

General thrust

The Conservatives frame skills as supply-side reform. A Skills Bill to close gaps, redirect of the Apprenticeship Levy, college funding uplift, and parity of esteem between university and apprenticeship routes. Growth Scotland is the proposed delivery body. (p.24-25, 68-70)

Key proposals

- **Skills Bill:** framework for cooperation between schools, colleges and universities. (p.69)
- **Apprenticeship Levy:** redirect to expand apprenticeships; open to all ages. (p.69)
- **College funding uplift:** match universities for similar degrees. (p.69)
- **Skills-gap premium:** pay colleges extra for courses in skills-gap subjects. (p.70)
- **14-15 pathway:** formal school-college partnerships. (p.70)
- **Free tuition retained:** explore alternative admissions systems. (p.69)
- **SkillsFuture-style accounts:** via Growth Scotland agency. (p.24-25)
- **Energy Skills Passport:** oil and gas workers retrain including into nuclear. (p.48)
- **Teacher workforce plan.** (p.55)
- **Health and social care workforce plan.** (p.67)

How they propose to fund it

The Skills Bill is a legal vehicle with no line-item cost in the manifesto. Uplifting college funding to match university levels for similar degrees is a sizeable redistribution; the flow from universities to colleges is not quantified. Alternative admissions is opaque. Adult accounts need a per-head value to be evaluable and none is given. The assumption is that Growth Scotland reallocates spending rather than generating new capital.

Scottish Labour

General thrust

Labour treats skills as an industrial strategy pillar. A statutory Skills Board. Ringfenced Apprenticeship Levy. Modernised apprenticeships. College uplift. Digital Skills Passport. 9,000 new apprenticeships and a 10-year rolling workforce plan. (p.37-41, 95)

Key proposals

- **9,000 new apprenticeships:** apprenticeship guarantee for qualified applicants. (p.37)
- **Statutory Skills Board:** sub-group of industrial strategy. (p.38)
- **Levy ringfence:** Scotland's share for skills development. (p.37-38)
- **Long-term skills forecasts:** published labour forecasts. (p.38)
- **Apprenticeship modernisation:** taster, clearing and tailoring. (p.38-39)
- **College reform:** Apprenticeship Centres of Excellence; Skills Accelerators. (p.41)
- **Digital Skills Passport:** digital record of skill, qualifications, experience. (p.40)
- **Parent Works Scheme:** college-delivered training for parents. (p.40)
- **Workforce plans:** 10-year rolling plans NHS, education, construction. (p.15, 20, 48, 68)
- **SDS consolidation:** consolidate Skills Development Scotland activity; redeploy resource. (p.38)
- **College funding increase.** (p.95)

How they propose to fund it

9,000 new apprenticeships is specific on number, silent on cost, sector mix and unit value. The Skills Board sits inside industrial strategy and its budget draws on that envelope. SDS consolidation is positioned as the fiscal headroom for the pay-as-you-go costs of Skills Board, Passport and sector Accelerators; transition costs are not scored. The Levy ringfence depends on UK Government acceptance of a Scottish carve-out, which is not currently policy.

SNP

General thrust

The SNP casts the skills offer under a Skilled Scotland banner, protecting free tuition and expanding apprenticeships. Total scale is the largest but phasing and funding path are not always explicit. (p.11, 19, 60-61)

Key proposals

- **150,000 apprenticeships:** over the Parliament; graduate apprenticeships to over 8,000. (p.19)
- **Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant:** backed by the UK Apprenticeship Levy. (p.19, 61)
- **College access:** continue to expand access to Scotland's colleges. (p.61)
- **Apprenticeships for Disabled Young People.** (p.61)
- **Single national skills plan:** Skilled Scotland. (p.60)
- **Free tuition protected.** (p.7, 19, 61)
- **Digital skills initiative:** skills for digital services. (p.39)
- **College funding package in development.** (p.61)
- **Rural and island workforce:** technology and training support. (p.57)
- **Displaced Workers Scheme:** address UK immigration changes. (p.57)

- **Employment law devolution:** continue to call for. (p.61)

How they propose to fund it

150,000 apprenticeships is headline without a total cost. “Over the Parliament” implies a cumulative figure rather than annual. The Accelerator Grant eligibility is not set out. The college funding package is flagged as “in development”, which means it is not available at manifesto-publication stage. The Displaced Workers Scheme needs an immigration policy partner that does not currently exist.

Scottish Liberal Democrats

General thrust

The Lib Dems position colleges as anchors of local economic development and build out a new Skills Strategy to match training to need. The platform combines college repair, apprenticeship cliff-edge fixes and sector-specific workforce plans. (ch.4, p.20-21, 43-44)

Key proposals

- **Skills Strategy:** map current and future gaps. (p.20)
- **Apprenticeship funding:** reorganise to address cliff edges that deter providers. (p.20)
- **10% college budget increase.** (p.8)
- **College alignment:** align courses with Skills Strategy; build on Budget-secured funding for care and offshore wind. (p.43)
- **College governance:** freedom to innovate and to borrow. (p.44)
- **Vocational repair:** restore colleges to local economic leadership. (p.41, 43-44)
- **Corseford and agricultural colleges:** secure future. (p.44)
- **NHS and care workforce plan:** rolling 10-year. (p.28)
- **Foundation apprenticeships:** at end of school. (p.20-21)
- **Immigration sensitive to skills needs.** (p.83)
- **Career change and upskilling support.** (p.13, 91)

How they propose to fund it

A 10% college budget uplift is quoted as already secured; no marginal add is quantified. Borrowing powers for colleges is a governance change, not a public spend. Apprenticeship cliff-edge reform is a funding-rules change, not a new line. Skills Strategy development is within existing budgets. The manifesto’s broader fiscal posture - halving consultancy, quango review - is not enough to fund the workforce plan component at scale.

Reform UK Scotland

General thrust

Reform bundles employment, education and training under a joined-up Scottish Skills Strategy targeted at 10 priority business sectors. Levy reboot, vocational focus and college pathways for young people not aimed at university. Education Scotland abolished. (p.10)

Key proposals

- **Scottish Skills Strategy:** across the 10 priority sectors. (p.10)
- **Levy reboot:** every penny of Apprenticeship Levy into apprenticeships linked to colleges. (p.10)
- **Vocational routing:** direct non-university pupils into trades via technical colleges with multi-year funding. (p.10)
- **Adult Re-Skilling Taskforce.** (p.10)
- **University funding review:** degrees deliver value. (p.10)
- **Abolish Education Scotland:** return curriculum responsibility to head teachers. (p.10)
- **Scottish Energy Workforce Plan:** linked to colleges. (p.9)
- **Workforce plan:** train more doctors and nurses in Scotland. (p.8)
- **Apprenticeships for abattoirs and fishing.** (p.13)

How they propose to fund it

The Levy reboot redirects existing Levy revenue rather than committing new money. Multi-year technical college funding is not quantified. Adult Re-Skilling Taskforce has no budget. Abolishing Education Scotland saves a headline quango cost; transition of curriculum functions to head teachers is not costed. The 10 priority sectors are not named, which makes scope evaluation impossible.

Scottish Greens

General thrust

The Greens position skills inside an industrial mission. A Green Skills and Jobs approach with annual Outlook, regional hubs and a New Deal for Apprenticeships. Fair pay and the living wage are prominent as a condition of public funding. (p.23-24, 37-38)

Key proposals

- **New Deal for Apprenticeships:** fair pay, adult entry routes, recognition. (p.24)
- **Apprenticeship standards:** minimum standards for quality and fair treatment. (p.24)
- **Living wage:** condition of public funding for all apprentices. (p.24)
- **No age caps:** on apprenticeships. (p.24)
- **System lead partners:** colleges and universities lead apprenticeship delivery. (p.24)
- **Green Jobs and Skills Outlook:** annual, links infrastructure investment to workforce planning. (p.24)
- **Green Skills Hubs:** regional, linking colleges, employers and unions. (p.24)
- **Oil and gas retraining:** publicly funded, open to all. (p.24)
- **Just Transition Fund:** double to £1bn. (p.24)
- **College governance:** reserved councillor board seats. (p.38)
- **Fair work conditions:** in colleges and universities. (p.38)
- **Return-to-work maximisation:** for adults. (p.38)

- **On-site childcare in all colleges.** (p.32)

How they propose to fund it

Funding sits inside the wider Green revenue package - NDR surcharges, reformed LBTT, mansion and wealth tax proposals - rather than a dedicated skills envelope. Doubling Just Transition to £1bn is the largest named commitment; the period is not specified. Living wage for all publicly funded apprentices is a material employer cost; supply-side response is not modelled. Green Skills Hub number and capital envelope are not set out.