EDINBURGH CLIMATE CHANGE INSTITUTE

# ECCI Evidence Statements

## The co-benefits of climate action in Scotland

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## Key message

Scotland's Climate Change Plan sets out a vision of climate action that includes warmer homes, cleaner air and health benefits from active travel (Scottish Government, 2025). Framed in this way, climate policy begins to look less like an environmental task and more like part of a wider program of public value.

To support turning this vision into action, this evidence brief explores how the co-benefits of climate action – the social, economic and environmental impacts of climate actions, including both benefits and costs – can support, ***1) Reframing of the Case for Action, 2) Coordination Across Government and Local Authority Actors, and 3) Strengthening of Appraisal and Prioritisation of Climate Actions.*** We conclude with specific advice for the ways co-benefits can contribute to delivering the Scottish Climate Plan.

## What is the research question?

The question is not whether co-benefits exist in the abstract. It is how the Scottish Government should use better understanding and better information about the co-benefits of climate action in appraisal, policy design, delivery and monitoring.

Better understanding changes the story climate policy tells, moving it from one of compliance towards one of public value.

Better information makes that story usable by showing where benefits arise, to whom, through which pathways, over what timescale and with what trade-offs, which is what turns co-benefits from a communications device into a practical tool for prioritisation, accountability and just transition governance (Sudmant et al., 2025; ECCI, 2025a).

**Domestic and transport measures in Scotland's Climate Change Plan are associated with £7.96 billion in co-benefits the form of warm homes, a healthier population and improved mobility 2026–2040, equivalent to around £1,450 per person.**

## What does the Scotland evidence show?

Analysis from the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute that is included in the Draft Climate Plan shows that climate actions in the domestic and transport measures can deliver £7.96 billion in discounted co-benefits over 2026–2040, or roughly £1,450 per person. The largest benefits come from physical activity, with further benefits from reduced excess cold, noise, damp, congestion, road casualties and air pollution. Co-costs are also present, notably longer travel times, which matters because it shows that the wider effects of climate action are not uniformly positive and need to be managed rather than assumed away. This evidence, which can be explored at the community level using the UK Co-benefits Atlas , supports delivery of the climate plan in three ways.

### 1. Reframing the case for climate action

Too often, climate action is reduced to a narrow set of technologies or emissions metrics, when its real significance lies in how it reshapes everyday life and public value.  That wider value does not arise through one dominant dividend. Rather, climate action works through several pathways at once. In Highland, for example, shifting just under 1 km of car travel per person per week to walking or cycling is estimated to generate £845 million in co-benefits between 2025 and 2050, or £3,549 per person, driven mainly by physical activity but also by lower congestion, fewer collisions, cleaner air and reduced road repair costs. In Inverclyde, shifting half of homes from fossil-fuel heating to heat pumps is associated with £72.1

of the value public bodies are helping to create (Scottish Climate Intelligence Service [SCIS], 2025a, 2025b; Sudmant et al., 2025).

**Every £1 invested in climate action could deliver up to £14 in societal benefits, or as much as £160 billion over the next 20 years (Sudmant et al 2025)**

**2. A common frame for coordination across government and local delivery**

Climate action rarely fits inside one portfolio even when it is governed as if it does. Retrofit touches housing quality, fuel poverty, asset management, public health and procurement, while active travel touches transport, education, regeneration, road safety and preventative health. Co-benefits are useful here not because they give councils a new vocabulary, but because they provide a common frame for explaining why the same intervention matters to several services at once. The Highland active-travel example illustrates the point well: the same measure can be read simultaneously as a transport intervention, a public-health intervention and a preventative-spending intervention because its quantified benefits span physical activity, congestion, collisions and road maintenance (SCIS, 2025a).

That frame becomes operational when it sits on top of shared evidence structures. SCIS reports that all 32 Scottish local authorities have engaged in its user journey, with over 150 climate change officers involved, 114 platform users, more than 100 delivery partners engaged and over 1500 interventions logged. More importantly, SCIS reports that common data structures and comparable interventions have already improved coordination within and between authorities, increased the visibility of wider co-benefits across multiple policy priorities, and supported better coordination between local and national government (SCIS, 2025c). Used well, co-benefits help translate climate action into the terms through which housing, transport, planning, finance and public health already make decisions, which is often a precondition for joint commissioning, pooled budgets or earlier involvement from the actors who will need to deliver change.

**3. Strengthening appraisal and prioritisation of climate actions**

When measures move into appraisal and spending decisions, the practical value of co-benefits becomes sharper. Co-benefits analysis does not rescue weak proposals, but where wider public value is material and well evidenced it helps decision-makers see benefits that narrow cash-flow or carbon-only cases would overlook, especially when the avoided costs of an intervention fall in different parts of the system.

Clean heat in southeast Scotland offers a useful illustration. ECCI analysis of heat networks and retrofit across Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian identifies £2.1 billion in discounted benefits over 2025–2050, of which £353 million are direct social benefits, equivalent to around £2,035 per household, driven by cleaner air and lower exposure to cold and damp. Evidence of this kind does not tell the government what to do automatically, but it can help clarify which measures should move first, in which places, and on what rationale. That is also why local examples matter: Highland's active-travel scenario and Inverclyde's heat-pump scenario are not like-for-like options, yet they show how the type and scale of wider value vary sharply by intervention and context, which is precisely the information needed for better sequencing and more defensible prioritisation (ECCI, 2025b; SCIS, 2025a, 2025b; HM Treasury, 2026).

## How can this help policy delivery?

**1. Climate action struggles when it is presented mainly as a distant compliance obligation rather than as near-term improvements in daily life.**

In Scotland, parliamentary scrutiny of the draft Climate Change Plan has repeatedly called for clearer communication of what the Plan means for households and communities, alongside a more strategic approach to community benefit. Co-benefits help because they translate carbon budgets into outcomes that people can see and value: warmer homes, cleaner air, quieter streets and healthier travel. The UK Co-Benefits Atlas gives a concrete basis for that shift by modelling how the same national pathway plays out across more than 46,000 places. Framing evidence suggests that health and environmental benefits can strengthen support for climate policies (Dasandi et al., 2022; ECCI, 2025a).

**2. Climate delivery slows when governments lack a clear basis for deciding which measures should move first and where they should be targeted.**

Scrutiny of the draft Plan has raised concerns about back-loaded action, limited near-term clarity and the relative strength of plans beyond the first carbon budget. Co-benefits can support sequencing by identifying measures and places where early action produces both emissions reductions and visible social gains. The contrast between Highland's estimated

Inverclyde's £72.1 million in heat-pump co-benefits does not create a simple league table, but it does show why place-based evidence can help target action more intelligently and make the just transition more concrete (SCIS, 2025a, 2025b).

**3. Cross-government delivery becomes harder when housing, transport, planning, public health and finance are working with different objectives, data and mandates.**

Scrutiny has highlighted governance, policy-coherence and delivery gaps in the draft Climate Change Plan. Co-benefits do not solve governance problems on their own, but they do provide a common frame for coordination by showing why one intervention matters to several services at once. The SCIS programme already shows the value of shared evidence structures: all 32 local authorities have engaged in the user journey and SCIS reports improvements in coordination within and between authorities as a result of using comparable data and intervention categories (SCIS, 2025c).

**4. Appraisal is weaker when it counts direct financial costs or carbon alone and misses wider public value.**

A need for clearer information on costs and benefits, more transparent modelling assumptions, stronger links between the Plan and annual budgets, and greater clarity on financing is highlighted in scrutiny of the Draft Climate Plan. Co-benefits can contribute here by showing why retrofit, active travel and clean heat should be understood not only as emissions measures but also as health, housing and transport investments within Green Book logic. The heat-network analysis for Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian is useful precisely because it shows the scale of wider value that would otherwise be missed: £353 million in direct social benefits, or around £2,035 per household, alongside the larger carbon-related value of the transition (ECCI, 2025b; HM Treasury, 2026).

**5. Climate plans are difficult to steer when success becomes visible mainly through lagged emissions data.**

Analysis of the draft Plan's monitoring approach highlights the three-year lag in emissions reporting and the need for earlier indicators, public reporting and better local data integration. Co-benefits can help fill that gap by supplying nearer-term indicators of whether delivery is working, including measures linked to warm homes, active travel, air quality, noise, affordability and community benefit. Because many of these outcomes are observable sooner than climate stabilisation itself, they can help the government detect delivery problems earlier and show whether the Plan is improving everyday life while it is being implemented, not only whether it later met an emissions target (Scottish Government, 2025; ECCI, 2025a).

Taken together, the implication is straightforward. Co-benefits are most useful when they sit inside the operating logic of climate delivery rather than at the edge of it. They help explain why action matters, show where it may matter most, give public bodies a common frame for coordination, strengthen some business cases and provide earlier signals of whether delivery is improving people's lives. For the Scottish Government, better understanding and better information about co-benefits would not remove the politics or cost of transition, but they could make the Climate Change Plan more legible, more place-sensitive and more governable (ECCI, 2025a; CCC, 2026).

## Authors

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## Related ECCI work

This briefing sits within a wider ECCI programme that links national scenario analysis, local-authority support and place-based heat work. Across six UK urban regions, recent peer-reviewed work estimates that 79% of total benefits from climate action are social rather than financial; the UK Co-Benefits Atlas translates that approach into a public resource for more than 46,000 local areas, while SCIS is using related evidence to support planning and delivery across all 32 Scottish local authorities. A complementary programme of work shows how monetised and multi-criteria approaches can be used in complementary ways to surface the wider benefits of climate action, strengthen the case for investment and connect local climate decisions to housing, transport and health goals (Lait, Foxon, Higgins-Lavery, et al., 2026; Lait, Foxon, McLachlan, et al., 2026). Taken together, this body of work suggests that co-benefits are not an add-on to climate policy, but part of how climate action becomes legible and deliverable in practice (Sudmant et al., 2025; ECCI, 2025a; SCIS, 2025c).