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# Budget 2026

# Additional Investment

## SGB Pathways – Briefing note

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Sport for life

**sportscotland**  
the national agency for sport

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### 1.0 Introduction

The Scottish Government draft budget, announced on 13 January 2026, includes a significant new investment of £40 million for the sport sector. The following briefing provides a detailed outline of a proposal to strengthen the effectiveness of sporting pathways so that athletes can experience consistent, high-quality development environments that support their progression toward world-class performance.

### 2.0 Background

Historically, **sportscotland**'s investment in SGBs has prioritised medal success and performance outcomes on the world stage. While this approach has delivered success in a number of sports, there is increasing evidence that it may have limited focus on longer-term athlete development within the pathway. As a result, athlete and para-athlete development environments (ADEs) have not always been sufficiently resourced to consistently support the progression and preparation of younger athletes.

It is important to recognise the situation-specific nature of performance sport, sporting cultures and SGBs. There is no one way of structuring an effective pathway to the extent that all developments require tailored consideration. Athlete and Para Athlete Development Environments (ADEs) is a term used to describe the collective components of athlete development that apply to all sports to varying degrees. ADEs take different forms across sports encompassing combinations of SGB led programmes, club led programmes, and individual athlete led training and competitions.

In 2023, an SGB early pathway needs analysis was conducted, generating recommendations for improvements. The research indicates that the quality of developmental experiences provided within current pathways is sub-optimal, limiting athletes' opportunities to fully realise their potential. In addition, socio-economic conditions represent one of several interacting constraints that restrict equitable access to high-quality training environments, thereby undermining the

sustained and consistent development necessary to build sporting expertise over time. In summary, the research generated 5 recommendations to improve pathways:

1. Improve quality and quantity of coaching, including physical preparation coaching
2. Improve opportunities to train and compete
3. Improve affordability of access to ADEs
4. Produce clear guidance on training expectations and empower self-directed learning
5. Use training and performance data to drive improvements
6. Develop inclusive para-athlete development environments (which accommodate social care requirements where required), manage classification process and competition structures which consider bespoke requirements

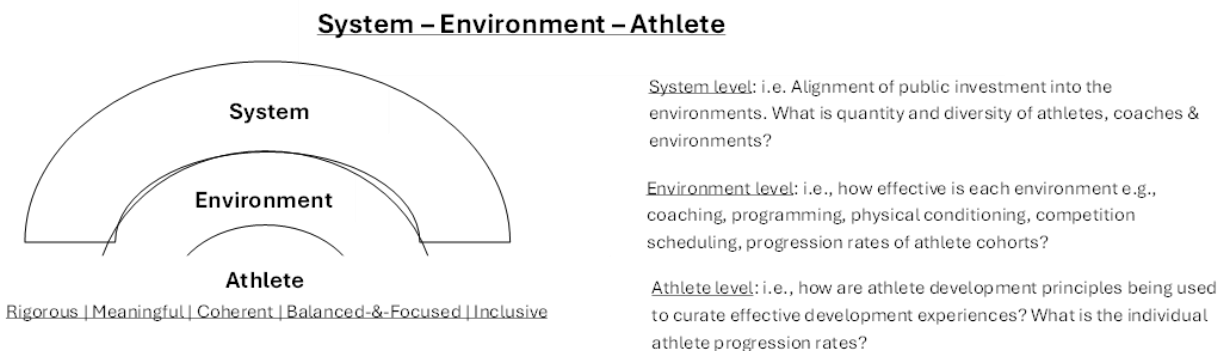
### 3.0 Process

#### 3.1 Purpose of funding

**To enable SGBs to strengthen the effectiveness of sporting pathways so that athletes can experience inclusive, consistent, high-quality development environments that support their progression toward world-class performance.**

In the ‘pathways’ part of the sporting system, we are interested in three interconnected levels of information which we present as an athlete – environment – system model (Fig 1). Each level requires different insights to understand overall pathway health. The Investment outcomes relate directly to athletes, development environments and systems.

*Figure 1: Athlete – Environment – System*



#### 3.2 What is being funded

Each sport has its own unique demands and therefore requires a tailored needs analysis to identify the most effective areas for development. Investment should be shaped by these sport-specific requirements and focused on strengthening both the people and the programmes that align to the intended outcomes.

Investment in people is likely to prioritise skilled coaches and dedicated pathway management roles. This may include lead coaches, physical preparation coaches, or pathway co-ordinators who can provide direction, continuity, parental guidance and day-to-day support for athletes, parents/guardians and volunteers. Strengthening these roles helps ensure better coaching quality, clearer progression routes, and a more coherent athlete experience.

Investment in programmes is likely to focus on increasing access to meaningful training and competition opportunities. Expanding daily/weekly training or training camps, competition schedules, or targeted performance initiatives that allow athletes to practise skills in coherent, rigorous, well informed and progressive environments. Enabling well-designed programmes to create the challenge, support and context required for sustained development.

Alongside this, there will be an emphasis on learning and development, with ongoing upskilling opportunities for both pathway staff and coaches. Providing education, mentoring, and professional development to support those delivering the pathway to remain current, confident, and capable of supporting athletes, and the people within their environments effectively.

### 3.3 Investment approach & timeline

This new pathway funding of £2m forms part of the overall £18m allocated to **sportscotland** in the Scottish Government January 2026 budget announcement.

The funding will be directed to Scottish Governing Bodies (SGBs) to strengthen pathway provision through targeted investment in people, programmes, or a combination of both. All awards will be assessed against agreed criteria and aligned to the established guidance principles to ensure consistency, impact, and value.

Pathway Investment Timeline			
2026			2027
April & May	June	July	April
SGB applications	<b>sportscotland</b> : assessment & investment decisions	Supplementary investments made to SGBs	Integrated into core investment processes

SGBs are invited to apply via the application portal by **31 May**. **sportscotland** will review applications and make investment decisions in **June**, with funding distributed in **July** through the supplementary investment process. Pathway investment will then be integrated into the **2027 core investment cycle**.

Delivery and impact will be supported throughout the year by **sportscotland** staff, with progress monitored and outcomes reviewed and refined annually to ensure continuous improvement. Applications will be submitted through a structured process, requiring SGBs to outline their case for investment and demonstrate how the proposed activity will strengthen pathway outcomes.

## 4.0 Using athlete development principles to design effective pathways

These principles are a guide, to aid a reflective and critical assessment of sporting pathways. The principles should be used to help sports reflect, design and articulate where additional investment will make significant difference to athlete development and experience. They are interconnected, often interdependent and can be in tension with one another. The principles are presented to aid analysis and design of support; they are not a checklist per se.

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The following information gives a brief description of what is meant by the principles of athlete development.

### 4.1 Rigorous athlete development

**4.1.1 Challenge & support** - the levels of challenge (e.g., volume, intensity, difficulties, focus) and support (e.g., sessional & programme coaching, physical preparation) are constantly matched to athlete's emerging needs to optimise learning and development. These principles are used to co-plan development programmes and competition schedules to ensure athlete development is paced appropriately.

**4.1.2 Evidence-informed** – Feedback is generated through measurement of key progression metrics combined with professional judgment of coaches, athletes and others (e.g., parents / guardian) to inform training programmes.

**4.1.3 Reflective & accountable reviews** - Coaches, athletes and others, regularly reflect on progression, programming, agency and autonomy to refine the process and focus of athlete development. Driving relevant and deliberate improvement, helping to build training behaviour aligned to rigorous (enough) programmes.

### 4.2 Meaningful experiences

**4.2.1 Motivational climate** - Athletes experience an environment that promotes autonomy, a sense of belonging, and a focus on mastery which fosters enjoyment and commitment to improvement. Athletes feel valued and supported, creating a positive setting for both performance and development.

**4.2.2 Development relationships** - Coaches, athletes, and peers build positive, respectful, and collaborative relationships. Coaches provide appropriate support and challenge, while athletes feel listened to and able to contribute to honest dialogue. Peer relationships are encouraged to create belonging, shared standards, and meaningful learning experiences. Together, these relationships support both performance and holistic development in-&-out of sport.

**4.2.3 Purposeful & relevant learning and development** - Training and competition are aligned to clear athlete 'work-ons' & development goals. Coaching is structured to support progression (e.g., simple to complex, isolation to integration, sequencing and testing) while remaining responsive to individual needs. Ongoing reflection, co-coaching, and planning conversations strengthen the connection between short-term actions and long-term development.

**4.2.4 Self-regulated learning** - Athletes are supported to take increasing ownership of their development through reflection, goal setting, planning, and review. They develop the ability to monitor progress, make informed decisions, and adapt their approach, building independence and lifelong learning skills.

**4.2.5 Resilience & coping skills** - Athletes are supported to develop the skills needed to manage challenge, pressure, and setbacks. Experiences are designed to appropriately stretch individuals, helping them build confidence, adaptability, and persistence. Athletes learn to respond constructively to success, failure, and key transitions within and beyond sport.

## **4.3 Coherent athlete experiences**

**4.3.1 Coherent learning** – athletes know what to work on, where, when, why & how. Athletes understand their development priorities which are regularly reviewed and adjusted. Athletes experience consistent, high standards of coaching, where sessions are purposeful, well-designed, and aligned to short-&-long-term development goals.

**4.3.2 Coherent programming** – Where the content and structure of their programme (e.g. training, competition, recovery) clearly supports their individual work-ons, it has direct connection to the short-&-long-term development goals.

**4.3.3 Coherent support** - coaches, parents, and others working together to optimise athlete development & experience. An experience that is deliberately coordinated across different environments to create shared understandings e.g., co-reflection & co-planning.

## **4.4 Inclusive, balanced-&-focused, experiences**

**4.4.1 EDI & para athlete pathways** – SGBs understand the diversity of athletes and coaches and ensure inclusive environments where everyone feels valued, supported, and able to progress. Barriers to Athlete Development Environments (ADEs) are actively addressed, including access, affordability, and bespoke support needs. For para athletes, this involves applying frameworks such as the Activity Inclusion Model (Scottish Disability Sport), tailored recruitment, classification processes, coach education, and provision of appropriate care, transport, and equipment to enable equitable and effective progression.

**4.4.2 Balanced development** – Programmes support the full range of athlete needs, including technical and tactical skills, physical preparation, and thinking and behavioral skills. The tensions between short-term performance in competition and long-term athlete development are deliberately managed. Programmes recognise wider holistic needs, such as education, wellbeing, and lifestyle-balance, which influence both sporting progress and broader life development. The balance between these priorities may shift over time to reflect the individual athlete’s stage, needs, and circumstances.

**4.4.3 Focused development** - training and support are prioritised toward the areas that will have the greatest impact on both short-term performance and long-term athlete progression. Time and resources are used deliberately to build competitive advantage while continuing to develop the capabilities required for future transitions and sustained progression. Where tensions arise between immediate outcomes and longer-term needs, decisions are made with athletes to support transparency and understanding within the developmental journey of sporting expertise.