CITY REGION DEAL
Edinburgh & South East Scotland
Integrated Regional Employability and Skills

IRES27+

Key Messages - September 2026

1.0 INTRODUCTION

"We are not asking Scottish Government to fund IRES beyond 2027 because it has been successful. We are asking Scottish Government to fund IRES beyond 2027 because at this time Scotland's economy needs what IRES has built."

- **Ken Gourlay; Chief Executive, Fife Council and Chair IRES Board**

2.0 MESSAGE TO MSP's & MINISTERS

The strongest message we need partners and stakeholders to give MSPs and Ministers is not actually about protecting the existing programme, but about protecting and scaling a piece of regional infrastructure that Scotland has already spent eight years building.

Essentially, without extension/enhancement funding Scotland will lose the only mature regional employability and skills system currently operating at scale. Without IRES27+ Scottish Government would no longer have a working model that has the potential to be scaled up across Scotland. Recreating what IRES has built would be more costly and take longer than building what has already been successfully developed.

3.0 FIVE KEY MESSAGES

3.1 Scottish Government investment has already built a Regional Skills Ecosystem. The cost of losing it would be greater than the cost of sustaining it

IRES27+ is not a short term programme seeking continuation funding. It is the regional infrastructure Scotland has spent eight years building to connect employers, skills providers, local authorities and government around a shared economic mission. The real question is not whether Scotland can afford to invest in IRES, but whether it can afford to lose the partnerships, strategic alignment, employer relationships and delivery capability that have taken years to create.

- Without continued investment, regional co-ordination, shared intelligence, employer engagement and progression pathways become fragmented, reducing the return on previous public investment and weakening Scotland's ability to respond to future workforce challenges.

3.2 Economic growth depends on Skills. Skills needs genuine, collaborative regional delivery.

Scotland cannot achieve its ambitions of; higher productivity, net zero, AI adoption, growth in advanced manufacturing and public service reform without a workforce equipped with the right skills. IRES27+ provides the regional Ecosystem and delivery mechanisms that turns national economic ambitions into practical workforce solutions.

- National policy sets direction, but growth happens in regional labour markets. IRES27+ connects employers, further and higher education and public partners to ensure skills investment aligns directly with current and projected economic demand.

3.3 Aligning local priorities and creating pathways out of poverty.

IRES27+ promotes economic growth, but importantly focuses on inclusive economic growth through the creation of better opportunities for people and local communities. IRES27+ supports the alignment of local employability priorities with regional economic strategy, underpinned by HELIX, a single client management system developed through IRES, which charts the employability journey of over 100,000 clients currently being supported across the region. IRES27+ is focused on helping those people to access the skills, jobs and career progressions they need to improve their circumstances and creating pathways out of poverty.

- By connecting local delivery with regional labour market demand, IRES creates clearer pathways into sustainable employment, supports progression into higher skilled, better paid work and helps tackle poverty through inclusive economic growth.

3.4 IRES27+ delivers on the direction of travel Scottish & UK Govts are pursuing.

IRES27+ is not asking Scottish or UK Government to change direction. It is already moving in the direction that government is pushing for in the future: regional empowerment, Community Wealth Building, public service reform, inclusive growth, net zero and a more demand led skills system.

- The IRES Ecosystem aligns national priorities with regional delivery, creating a single framework capable of connecting policy, investment and economic opportunity in a way that individual programmes cannot achieve alone.

3.5 IRES27+ is Scotland's demonstrator for Regional Skills Reform.

IRES is currently the most developed example of integrated regional employability and skills delivery in Scotland. Continued investment would not only benefit Edinburgh and South East Scotland, it provides Scotland with a proven model that can inform future regional skills reform across the country, while meeting each of Scottish Governments key priorities: Growing the Economy, Tackling Poverty, the Climate Emergency and Stronger Public Services.

- If Scotland is serious about greater regional empowerment and more joined up workforce planning, it needs exemplars that demonstrate what exceptional regional delivery looks like in practice. IRES provides them with an award winning demonstrator.
- The IRES Dashboard provides further detail on the 148,300 Skills Improvements; 11,483 Jobs; 636 Career Progressions and £12.38m of additional leverage that the IRES Programme has delivered to date.

4.0 INDUSTRY AND EDUCATION LEADS SUPPORT IRES27+

The case for IRES27+ is not being made by public sector partners alone. Employers, industry bodies, colleges, universities and third sector organisations across Edinburgh and South East Scotland are backing the continuation of IRES because they recognise the value of a co-ordinated regional skills ecosystem.

As of September 2026, 159 organisations and individuals have formally signed the IRES Pledge, with 58% representing industry and third sector organisations. Their support reflects a shared belief that Scotland's future economic success depends upon stronger regional collaboration to address the challenges identified with regard to skills demands.

4.1 IRES27+ Pledge Statements (FE/HE)

"As the Data Skills Gateway has shown, universities can play a vital role in upskilling residents for a high-skilled, future-ready workforce, providing training from primary school age through to adult learners. This pledge represents a renewed commitment to delivering skills and maximising opportunities for all across Edinburgh and South East Scotland."

- **Prof. Sir Peter Mathieson, Principal & Vice-Chancellor of The University of Edinburgh**

"Colleges play a vital role in the IRES programme, and signing this pledge underscores Borders College's continued leadership in supporting employability and skills across the region. It also demonstrates our commitment to working collaboratively with partners to help shape a thriving and inclusive workforce for the future."

- **Pete Smith, Borders College Principal**

"I'm delighted to sign the IRES pledge on behalf of Edinburgh College. We play a vital role in equipping learners across our region with the skills and confidence needed to move into employment and achieve success. This partnership will help individuals progress, support employers to grow, and strengthen the regional economy. We look forward to working with our partners to build on this work in the weeks and months to come."

- **Audrey Cumberford, Edinburgh College Principal**

"Fife College is proud to support the IRES 2027+ Pledge and its ambition to create a more connected, responsive and future-focused workforce across our region. As one of the region's largest skills colleges and one of Scotland's leading apprenticeship providers, we work alongside employers and partners to equip people with the skills, experience and opportunities needed to succeed in high-demand sectors, including construction, engineering, advanced manufacturing, health and social care, and renewable energy. The collaborative approach at the heart of IRES27+ reflects our commitment to creating clear pathways into higher-skilled, better-paid careers and supporting inclusive economic growth. By working together, we can strengthen the region's talent pipeline, help employers meet future workforce demands, and create more opportunities for people to build rewarding careers and fulfil their potential."

- **Jim Metcalfe, Fife College Principal**

"West Lothian College plays a vital role in connecting learners with the skills, confidence and experiences they need to succeed, while supporting employers to build a strong, future-ready workforce. We are really proud to be endorsing this, because collaboration is key to strengthening our regional economy and supporting long term, inclusive growth. IRES creates a powerful platform to align ambition with action, ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, can access meaningful pathways into education, training, and employment."

- **Hazel Brady, West Lothian College Principal**