

Speech: Citizen's Advice Bureau CEO Conference

28 May 2026

Professor Angela O'Hagan, Chair, Scottish Human Rights Commission

1. Welcome and introduction

Good morning and thank you for the invitation to be here today.

It's a real privilege to be in a room with so many leaders who deliver vital services, and are deeply embedded in communities across Scotland, seeing first-hand the realities of people's everyday lives.

Before I begin, let me briefly introduce myself. I am Professor Angela O'Hagan, Chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission. We are Scotland's independent National Human Rights Institution, sometimes described as the country's human rights watchdog.

Our role is to work alongside people to understand whether and how their rights are being realised. We seek to amplify those voices, and to hold duty bearers to account for meeting their human rights obligations.

But crucially, this is not work we can do alone. Realising human rights in Scotland is a shared endeavour. It depends on strong partnerships across civil society. And our relationship with Citizens Advice Scotland, and Bureaux across the country, is central to that.

2. Providing advice and the role of CABs

I want to begin with the role you play.

The legislation that established the Scottish Human Rights Commission explicitly prevents us from providing advice directly to individuals. And yet, we regularly hear from people who are experiencing challenges with their rights.

They email us. They call us. They contact us on social media. They are looking for help.

We cannot support them directly, but we can signpost them to those who can. Very often, that means directing them to their local Citizens Advice Bureau.

You are, in many ways, at the coalface of human rights protection in Scotland. You are embedded in communities across the country in a way that very few organisations are. You are often the first place people turn when something has gone wrong, or when they need to understand what they are entitled to. You are Human Rights Defenders.

And your impact is made possible not only by your leadership, but by the thousands of volunteers who give their time, expertise and compassion every day. They are a cornerstone of the service you provide and of the wider human rights ecosystem in Scotland.

Because if you don't know about your rights, let's be honest, you don't have them. Every day, you make those rights visible, understandable, and actionable.

3. Insight, data and lived experience

But your role goes beyond advice. You also hold something incredibly powerful, even if we don't often think about it as very glamorous: data.

A real-time picture of what is happening in people's lives. Across housing, social security, debt, energy, access to services, you see how systems are working, and where they are falling short. Where human rights obligations are being met, and where duties are being breached.

For the Scottish Human Rights Commission, this is essential. A core part of our role is monitoring human rights in Scotland, particularly economic, social and cultural rights, those rights that shape everyday life and dignity.

At the Commission, we are committed to working alongside communities and rights holders as part of our participation strategy. That means not simply analysing experiences at a distance, but working alongside people, listening to their perspectives, and ensuring that their voices shape how we understand rights in Scotland. And this is where your role is invaluable.

Because you are trusted in communities. You create the conditions where people can speak openly about their experiences. This is not just data. It is lived reality.

We have already seen the value of this partnership through our local monitoring work. In the Highlands and Islands, and more recently in the South of Scotland, Citizens Advice Bureaux were instrumental in helping us connect with communities, hear directly from people, and understand how rights are experienced on the ground, from access to healthcare and education, to participation in cultural life.

These insights ensure that our work is not an abstract legal analysis but is grounded in people's lives. And we want to build on that, to work more closely together so that the evidence you hold, and the voices you help to amplify, continue to shape how we assess the realisation of rights across Scotland.

4. Access to justice

Human rights are not abstract concepts. In Scotland, they are protected by international and domestic law. These frameworks are designed to realise rights and to provide routes to justice when things go wrong.

But too often, the reality does not match that promise. People are experiencing human rights denials, and they face further barriers when they try to challenge them. The journey to access justice can be long, complicated and expensive. It requires knowledge of where to turn. It can depend upon access to legal advice, time, capacity, and emotional resilience.

And many people simply do not have those things. Access to justice is a strategic priority for the Scottish Human Rights Commission. As part of our that, alongside the Children and Young People's Commissioner, we created a map of advice and information services to help people understand their rights and take action.

It has consistently been one of the most visited pages on our website. And when you look at that map, across every part of Scotland, the name you see most often is Citizens Advice Bureau. You are there, in communities, offering access to justice when people need it most.

That shared commitment is what led us to work with Parkhead Citizens Advice Bureau on our spotlight report on access to justice in the prison complaints system.

We found that too often, people in prison, who are entirely dependent on the state for the realisation of their rights, are unable to access justice. The complaints systems

are just too complex and inaccessible. In fact, our team of human rights legal experts struggled to understand it, so you can only imagine how difficult it would be for someone who has a learning disability, or who speaks English as a second language. We also learned that some people don't feel safe making a complaint, that they don't trust that it won't be shared with those who have mistreated them in the first place.

As part of our work to improve access to justice for prisoners, we worked together with Parkhead Citizens Advice Bureau to develop a plain English guide to the Prison Rules, explaining the rights that everyone in prison in Scotland has.

That guide is now being used across the prison estate, and the Scottish Prison Service has committed to produce more accessible versions, including Easy Read, British Sign Language and other community languages. This is vital, because rights should not be left behind at the prison gates.

Key to all our work at the SHRC is participation, hearing and lifting the voice of rights holders and supporting human rights defenders – like yourselves. We support this development in our approach with a new Participation Strategy, that is woven in to our engagement with rights holders and defenders, into the design of our rights monitoring projects (spotlights), and into engagement with duty bearers (public bodies). The full strategy is available on our website if you want more detail. You'll also find our Theory of Change approach there too which might be of interest as I know you are also thinking about impact – capturing and feeding back impact and how you make a difference.

5. Poverty, frustration and social cohesion

Finally, I want to reflect on the wider context in which we are all working. One of our key priorities this year is poverty. We know that poverty intersects with so many human rights.

The right to housing, to the highest attainable standard of health, to affordable food and essential services. But it also affects civil and political rights. We know that people living in poverty are more likely to experience situations where their liberty is restricted, whether in prison or in mental health settings.

Across Scotland, we are seeing the daily reality of people struggling to afford the basics: food, energy, housing.

In many cases, that struggle turns to frustration. In some cases, it turns to anger.

And in Scotland, and globally, we are seeing those frustrations expressed as tensions within and between communities. When people are not seeing improvements in their lives, there are some voices who suggest that human rights, or even the rights of others, are to blame.

But human rights are not the problem. They are part of the solution. They provide the framework that requires public authorities to act with fairness, dignity and accountability.

These rights are non-negotiable. They are for everyone, even or I would say especially, in difficult times.

And the most effective way to reduce frustration, to build trust, and to strengthen communities is to make those rights real in people's everyday lives.

That is exactly what you help to do every day.

A strong, evidence-based human rights framework should be the starting point of any work to ensure that men, women and children in Scotland can live a full and safe life of autonomy and dignity.

That framework must be robust. It must support those responsible for addressing poverty but also hold them accountable for it. And it must be designed with full participation from the people of Scotland, especially the most marginalised and disadvantaged. Their experiences must be recognised – and their voices must be influential.

Politicians and others must strive to understand those issues in people's lives and demonstrate meaningful action to address these. Human rights, and particularly economic, social and cultural rights - rights to a decent standard of living, to nutritious food, to a roof over our heads, to education, to healthcare - offer a clear and practical framework through which the State can and should ensure everyone in Scotland has the highest attainable standard of living.

I want to share and highlight three of the SHRC's priorities, which I know will resonate with your own:

- A pragmatic and constitutionally appropriate approach to incorporating human rights treaties into Scots Law.

- Improving access to justice through increased legal aid and strengthening the mandate of the SHRC as Scotland's independent National Human Rights Institution.
- Parliament to ensure scrutiny of proposed legislation and budget through the lens of Scotland's human rights obligations and engage fully with the annual State of the Nation report from the SHRC and the Universal Periodic Review process.

We will be working with new members of the Scottish Parliament – and those returning – to progress these priorities and ensure the everyday realities and voices of communities across Scotland are heard.

We have already done this with all our spotlight reports – on access to justice matters, the experience of learning disabled people in inappropriate care settings and the denial of their right to independent living, in our forthcoming briefing on poverty as a human rights issue, and of course our round Scotland spotlight on economic, social and cultural rights.

I am sure you will be familiar with our Highlands and Islands spotlight, as I know quite a few of you were involved, and that others have been involved in the South of Scotland project where the fieldwork just concluded in May.

In the economic, social and cultural rights spotlight, we took the requirements of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and used the requirement of the treaty and the recommendations (Concluding Observations) of the treaty body, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and used that as an analytical framework for collecting the data on the everyday experiences of people across Highlands and Islands. We have then presented that in a very accessible format so that rights holders can see at a glance where the gaps are that they told us about and that they are visible to others, and that duty bearers can also see the gaps and then use the framework as an improvement plan, with clear actions across the different areas rights – service provision – to work on over the coming period.

We're going to move into a group exercise shortly based on that work in the Highlands and Islands and now the South of Scotland. Before we do, I want to run through some of the findings from that report, some questions to get you thinking about your own areas, and then I will talk you through the exercise and what the paper you have in front of you means.

6. Closing: working together

Thank you so much for your engagement and participation just now, I want to close with this: Realising human rights in Scotland is not something any one organisation can achieve alone.

It requires partnership, shared effort. It cannot happen without organisations like yours, rooted in communities, trusted by the public, and creating the space for people to be heard.

Because ensuring that the voices of communities shape decisions is not an optional extra; it is essential to making human rights real.

At the Scottish Human Rights Commission, we rely on your insight, your evidence, and your connection to communities to do our work effectively. And in turn, we will continue to use our mandate to amplify those voices, to influence change, and to hold systems to account.

Because ultimately, our work is connected by a shared purpose. To ensure that human rights are not just principles on paper, but something people feel and experience in their everyday lives.

Thank you.