

local devolution

strengthening Scotland's local democracy

Scottish Conservative
local government elections 2012

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There is an overwhelming desire for change in Scotland. The nature and scale of this change will be at the forefront of discussions for years to come and we will be an integral part of the process. This document outlines a Scottish Conservative vision for change and complements our local manifestos that focus on local priorities.

This is a positive vision of a government that is closer to communities and individuals – where it belongs. It requires fundamental changes in legislation, regulation and structure. Most of all it requires a change in thinking – a shift from centralisation and control to localism and freedom.

Scottish Conservatives believe in local democracy and local decision-making and we want action to reverse the decades-long trend that has favoured an increasing centralisation of power in the corridors of central government, rather than in Scotland's town halls and communities.

The effect of this centralisation has been to stifle local democracy, strip councils of accountability and constrain their ability to respond as effectively as they otherwise might to the needs of local people.

Scottish Conservatives want a significant shift in the way local government

works. We want to give people the power to run their own communities and bring positive change to their neighbourhoods.

Our aims are to restore the freedom of Scotland's councils, to promote the healthy diversity of provision necessary to ensure high quality services and to guarantee that at all times the needs, priorities and ambitions of individual communities are paramount.

Scottish Conservatives believe in lower taxes. Restricting - and where possible reducing - the tax burden on Scottish families is a key priority for us. We will support a reduction in council tax for those local authorities - such as Stirling - who are able to deliver it.

A vote for the Scottish Conservatives is a vote to strengthen our local democracy. It's a vote to restore accountability, to empower local communities and to decisively shift power away from government to where it should properly rest, in the hands of local people.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ruth Davidson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Ruth Davidson MSP

Leader, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party

Power to Councils

At the heart of our vision for the future is a fundamental shift of power from central to local government. Scottish councils need to be responsible for more of their income and need to have the freedom to adapt the way they work as well as the way they provide services. A one-size-fits-all approach is flawed and we want councils to be free to adapt to suit the needs of local communities.

Financial autonomy

Business Rates

We want to encourage business growth across Scotland and reward local authorities who attract jobs and growth in their area. Therefore, the Scottish Conservatives would double the Business Rates Incentivisation Scheme, returning 100% of non-domestic rates revenues raised beyond target directly to councils. We would monitor and review targets to ensure they are meaningful.

This will greatly incentivise councils to support business growth, whilst maintaining the certainty, predictability and administrative simplicity of a national poundage rate for businesses. We are committed to a rate that does not rise beyond inflation and oppose any punitive taxes on a select few.

The Small Business Bonus Scheme, as well as other rate relief schemes, must continue operation. We would, however, also give local

authorities discretionary power to use Business Rates Incentivisation Scheme revenues to offer discounts for businesses should they so wish.

This system would give councils the motivation and further tools to promote business-friendly policies within their areas and ensure that non-domestic rates revenues are reinvested in the communities from which they are raised - in turn helping to support local economic growth and jobs.

We want to see councils work with businesses – not against them. We support Business Improvement Districts and we want councils to encourage the spread of these partnerships, provided there is wide support from local businesses.

Ring-fenced Grants

The Scottish Government has reduced the ring-fencing of council budgets, but central control continues to be exerted over a proportion of the funds allocated to councils, seeking to force into line the delivery of local services with the political priorities of national politicians. This is exacerbated by the Concordat which places further restrictions upon local government.

This is entirely the wrong approach. Rather than being extensions of central government, local councils should be free to order their own priorities. Central funding of councils should be made through a single grant allocation, reflecting the population and social needs of each council area as well as rurality. This grant allocation should be made

**we will incentivise
councils to support
business growth**

without conditions and it should be for each council to determine how it should be spent in order to best reflect local circumstances.

Service Delivery Autonomy

Power of Initiative

Scottish devolution is based on the principle that Holyrood can do whatever it wishes unless the issue is reserved to Westminster. This gives it great flexibility to decide how and where it spends its resources, but this is in stark contrast to local authorities which are constrained by an excess of central government legislation, regulation and rules.

We want to extend devolution locally. We would reshape the relationship of local authorities and Holyrood around a power of initiative, which would give councils the flexibility to adapt their structure and service provision to suit the needs of their respective local communities.

Councils should not feel that they are unable to make a change unless there is legislation to allow it – there must be a presumption that change can be made unless there is specific legislation to prohibit it. This would give councils the power to be creative and innovative and serve as a further incentive to advance the well-being of local communities.

Councils should consider all the available options when deciding on the best way to provide services. Both the private and voluntary sectors

should be given more opportunities to bid in public procurement contracts as they often provide not only more cost-effective, but higher quality services. We support councils exploring further joint working, joint delivery and the integration of existing service provision.

Scottish Conservatives are committed to removing unnecessary constraints on councils and councillors and we therefore propose removing local authorities from the remit of the Standards Commission and the Public Standards Commissioner for Scotland and will allow councils to adopt their own Codes of Conduct and complaints procedures.

Housing

Affordable housing has long been restrained by central government legislation. Social landlords, including councils, do not have the freedom to shape their allocations policy according to the needs of local communities. They are by law prevented from taking into account the full range of relevant factors when allocating housing. We, however, believe they are the ones best placed to decide how to allocate housing.

Scottish Conservatives would remove the constraints on housing allocation that arise from central legislation. This would allow social landlords to consider income, property ownership, age or local connections when deciding on who will get a home. The allocations policy should be decided in dialogue with the communities affected to ensure tailored local policies. While local connections might be more important in rural areas, other factors might be more appropriate in urban areas. Removing the constraints would give landlords the

**we will ensure
local control over
housing allocations**

flexibility they need to meet the priorities of their individual areas.

We are committed to cracking down on anti-social behaviour of tenants in social housing and have been leading the debate on this issue throughout our time in Parliament. It is simply unacceptable when people who are provided with housing don't respect their neighbours, their communities and often not even their own homes.

We advocate a zero tolerance approach, set out clearly in tenancy agreements, which should be enforced thoroughly, decisively and quickly. We would also consult on options to make the eviction process simpler, alongside a much greater use of the powers already available under current legislation. Furthermore, we believe that more anti-social behaviour evictions should result in an 'intentional homelessness' status.

Planning

Councils retaining more of their business rate income will result in local planning authorities having a greater incentive to pursue new developments. This, however, has to be accompanied by removing other barriers in the planning system and a strengthened focus on local decision making.

We propose removing the top cap for planning fees for large businesses, which is currently ten times lower in Scotland than in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This would affect only a small number of developments but would provide a very welcome boost in funding for councils. Planning authorities could use this additional

income to speed up the decision-making process.

Scottish Conservatives believe that decisions affecting local communities should predominantly be made by those affected by them. We therefore want to see decisions made at as local a level as possible.

local decisions should not be overturned to stay in line with central government priorities

We are opposed to the idea that local decisions should be overturned to stay in line with central government priorities, especially in the case of wind farms. The planning appeals process is an important safeguard, but is too often abused by central authorities. We want to see the Scottish Government in dialogue with planning authorities during the development of strategic and local development plans and override their decisions in only most exceptional circumstances when they deviate from the agreed plans.

Changes to the Standards Commission would include the abolition of the central Councillors' Code of Conduct and allowing local authorities to bring forward their own Codes. This, amongst other things, means that councillors would no longer be prevented from expressing their opinion at any stage of the planning application process. We believe that being elected to office is in itself a commitment to act in the public interest and a "forced objectivity" in planning decisions is unnecessary.

Power to Communities

Devolving power locally does not only mean shifting power to councils. It is important that we devolve power further and include local communities directly in shaping their surroundings and service provision. We want the voluntary sector and other community bodies to play a much more prominent role in the delivery of services.

Introduce Community Right to Bid

An assumption that councils should have a monopoly over service provision is not only unhelpful, but frequently damaging. Charities and other bodies often have innovative ideas and practices developed through decades of hard work. It is only right that we give them the recognition and opportunities they deserve.

We would introduce a new Community Right to Bid, which would give community and voluntary bodies the right to express interest in taking over a particular service. The local authority would be required to respond to this challenge and unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal the council would run a procurement exercise where the services would be opened up to bids.

We recognise that some councils already consider alternative models of service provision but a right to bid would open the doors to a much greater degree of participation. The result in the long run would be a shift towards considering the best available option and consequently an overall improvement in service provision. It would, for example, allow

community groups to take over the maintenance of their local park that has been neglected by the council.

Reform Community Right to Buy

We recognise that some communities have a genuine interest in taking on assets which, through closure, might otherwise be lost, and have the capacity to put together a competitive bid. However, the lack of a formal process through which this can be achieved and often lack of time and guidance required, hampers them. Communities in Scotland have a 'right of first refusal' on land that they have registered an interest in. The Community Right to Buy Land is, however, limited in scope whilst infringing on private property rights at the same time.

We would therefore reform Community Right to Buy legislation to emphasise our belief in community power. We would change the 'right of first refusal' to a 'right of first offer', introducing a statutory obligation to consider community offers for registered assets and allow sufficient time for communities to put together a bid.

We want to see the Register of Community Interests in Land decentralised and extended to other assets beyond rural land. The Community Right to Buy Land should change to a wider Community Right to Buy. We want to see councils maintain a list of community interests, nominated by community bodies, which can then bid to take control of the asset. This will, for example, allow communities to gain control of local community centres, shops or post offices that would have otherwise been lost.

**we will empower
local communities to
run local services**

We want to see councils encouraged to work with community groups when disposing of assets owned by local authorities. However, we also want communities to have formal powers to bid for private land and property that they believe would best be managed by them, should it come up for sale. This should be strictly limited to assets that demonstrably further the social well-being of local communities or have done so in recent past, with the final decision still resting with the property owner.

Diversity in Education

Scottish Conservatives are very supportive of alternative models of primary and secondary education. We want to encourage diversity in the educational system. Where communities feel it is appropriate, schools should be able to operate outwith council control. We would also enable communities to set up their own schools, which they believe reflect their needs and local demand.

**we want to encourage
diversity in the
educational system**

We want to see schools have greater autonomy over their own budgets. Schools should be free to consider alternative service providers. Councils currently have full control over a majority of the services used by schools, regardless of whether there might be more cost-effective and better options available.

We also believe schools should be opened up to more community use. The premises under council control, be it gymnasia or sport grounds, could often be utilised in a variety of ways that can help local communities come together.

A priority remains the improvement of early years support. Research has consistently shown a link between engaging with young children and their attainment in later years. We want to introduce a greater degree of flexibility into the system and, where funds allow, advocate the extending of the funding for pre-school education, especially to disadvantaged two year olds. We will also explore innovative approaches to increasing parental support and would introduce training for early identification of dyslexia to teachers in Scotland.

Power to Individuals

Devolving power to councils and allowing communities to become more involved has to go hand in hand with an even more fundamental shift of power – straight to the individual. Scottish Conservatives have always believed in freedom of choice and that government should stay out of an individual's business unless that individual allows it. People make the best decisions, but they need to be given the opportunities to make them.

Referenda and Elections

Scottish Conservatives want individuals to be in control over the decisions that affect them. Shaping the communities people live in as well as the services that they use should extend well beyond local government elections held every few years. We want to see a more democratic engagement in local government and extend local accountability.

We remain committed to giving people the option to change the structure of their local authority. We would hold referenda in Aberdeen, Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh to give people the opportunity to elect a powerful provost. The exact nature of the post would be a matter of consultation and for each council to decide what is most appropriate for their area but we would expect elected provosts to take on powers of current council leaders, some of the Chief Executive, as well as the ceremonial roles of Lord Provosts.

We believe that strong local accountability must be maintained in the proposed single police and fire services. We are concerned that the proposals put forward by the Scottish Government centralise political control over the police and fire services without introducing sufficient safeguards to ensure local accountability and protect community based policing. We believe locally elected police commissioners, with a responsibility for the local police plan, would ensure continued accountability to the communities served by our police service.

Personalised Care

Scottish Conservatives strongly believe in the principle of direct payments and we want to see them extended across the fullest range of services. The disappointing level of enthusiasm for direct payments by many councils has been a running theme for years and one that has stifled a much-needed boom. While there have been improvements over past years, further legislation is needed to ensure a much greater take up.

Scottish Conservatives have consistently argued for Health and Social Care budgets to be merged and we remain committed to doing so. However, rather than a centralisation of these services, we see this as an opportunity to devolve power and choice to service users through a further expansion of individual budgets, so that patients can commission their care from providers of their own choice and in a way that meets their individual needs.

we will promote greater choice in health and social care services

We deeply admire the work of carers across Scotland and want to see councils develop closer working relationships with them and local carer organisations. We recognise carers as equal partners in care and are committed to providing appropriate respite hours, in partnership with the voluntary sector, to support them.

Enterprise and Broadband

Scottish Conservatives want Scotland to be one of the most competitive places in the world to do business and we aim to make it as easy as possible for people to start businesses of their own. Business growth should be the number one priority across all levels of government, especially in times of austerity. We can only fight unemployment by helping enterprise, not by indefinitely expanding the public sector.

We believe that doubling the Business Rates Incentivisation Scheme will significantly motivate councils to prioritise business growth. It will encourage local authorities to speed up the planning system and to do away with unnecessary red tape in the form of an ever-growing regulatory framework.

Ensuring high-speed broadband connectivity is essential for individuals trying to set up a business. We want to enable people to work from home and run their own business no matter where they live. We welcome the significant amount of funding provided by HM Government for next generation broadband. We want to see councils work with all levels of government, communities as well as the private sector, in ensuring easy access to high-speed internet, especially in rural communities.

spent should not be easily available to everyone. Everyone should be free to look up detailed information on their council's expenditure and have the opportunity for detailed scrutiny. We want each council to maintain a list of employee job titles along with salary spreads which will be published online. This would allow local residents to clearly see where their money is going and get a better sense of the structures that underpin local government.



**Scottish
Conservatives**

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