Ruth Davidson
STANDING UP FOR RURAL SCOTLAND
Introduction

Scotland’s rural economy generates billions of pounds every year. Our food and drink, from whisky and salmon, Aberdeen Angus beef and Stornoway black pudding to haddock and chips are celebrated and enjoyed the world over. Our wild lands draw in millions of tourists a year with tourism expenditure approaching ten billion pounds. We are world leaders in the generation of renewable electricity and are at the forefront of dealing with the challenges this technology brings.

But despite this bright picture both the agricultural and fisheries sectors are currently facing crises. Farmers, failed by the Scottish Government which has botched up the delivery of payments so badly that many are facing unparalleled financial problems. Fishermen, faced with further regulations from Brussels on how they are allowed to fish, are left in limbo by a Scottish Government that refuses to spend money on supporting an industry forced to pay for its own policing. Both groups are fed up with empty promises and vacuous posturing from the SNP; both groups have recently staged unprecedented protests outside the Scottish Parliament demanding to be heard - demanding the Scottish Government act to help these two vital industries.

Scotland’s rural communities can only thrive with appropriate digital infrastructure, good transport links and secure and affordable housing. Rural Scotland faces unique challenges and these require unique answers. The Scottish Conservatives will continue to provide these and put pressure on the Scottish Government to act.

Sorting out the SNP’s Mistakes

The Scottish Conservatives have been knee-deep in trying to sort out the mess created by the SNP Government, while also addressing the constant challenges emanating from Brussels and promoting a positive way forward for Scotland’s hard pressed fishing and farming communities.

Four of the most recent group of Scottish Conservative MSPs are working farmers and land managers. Ten of our candidates for Holyrood this year are farmers or land managers. We understand rural Scotland, because we come from rural Scotland.

It was the Scottish Conservative Party which first raised the issue of delays to farm payments, and it was Scottish Conservative MEP Ian Duncan who secured agreement from the European Agriculture Commissioner that adjustments to the pre-auditing procedures and the split payments options would be permissible. It was the Scottish Conservative Party who first brought the issue to the floor of the Scottish Parliament.

It was the Scottish Conservatives who took the fight against the disproportionate introduction of Marine Protected Areas off the West Coast to the Scottish Parliament. The Party and the inshore fishing sector are not against MPAs in principle - in fact we were clear in our support of marine conservation - but they must be proportionate and allow sustainable fishing activities to continue. The SNP has failed to grasp the socio-economic impact of these proposals on individual fishermen and their fishing processing customers and that they are risking jobs losses in some very fragile and remote communities.

It was Scottish Conservatives who fought for a fair implementation of the new discard ban for demersal and pelagic fisheries. In December, the SNP’s Green group in the European Parliament voted to introduce the discard ban for cod as well as other demersal fisheries - in spite of the hugely damaging impact this would have on the white fish industry. Ian Duncan MEP and his Conservative colleagues on the Fisheries Committee acted swiftly and managed to overturn the decision and ensure a one year stay of the introduction of cod into the ban.
Only the Scottish Conservatives are committed to standing up for our rural communities and our rural economy. It is the beating heart and the lungs of our country. Those who make it so deserve better than SNP mismanagement. Building on our Rural Commission Report, our plan ranges from a call to accelerate the roll out of superfast broadband to increasing the number of affordable homes across our rural areas.

Scotland is already becoming one of the most centralised countries in the western world, with too much power concentrated in the M8 corridor. Our plan is focused on spreading power down into our towns and villages – giving communities the right to decide on wind farms in their area, and demanding an in depth review of Police Scotland.

“Farmers need to know that the underlying problems are being sorted”

“This is a scandal of the SNP's own making and it's no surprise that farmers are so angry today.”

Supporting Scottish Farmers

The Scottish Government and the Rural Cabinet Secretary, Richard Lochhead, have managed to create the ‘perfect storm’ of policy failure and administrative incompetence.

The SNP decided to design a new computer system to administer CAP applications and payments. The problem is that it doesn’t work. The SNP knew for over a year that it didn’t work, but have repeatedly refused to admit things were going wrong.

The entire programme was expected to cost £88m but is now forecast to come in at closer to £200m. The largest cost overruns have been in IT — the original budget was £29m but by March 2015 had risen 111% to more than £60m.

With deadlines repeatedly missed and farmers facing an unprecedented financial crisis, the Scottish Government decided to bypass their IT system altogether and use £200m of national funds to deliver payments that farmers were expecting to start coming in December 2015.

Added to this, Scottish Conservatives recently exposed that fines imposed by the European Commission for missing strict milestones could be about to add another £100m to the overall cost. This is completely unacceptable.

In the absence of any credible opposition from Labour or the Liberal Democrats, it was the Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party that has been at the forefront of taking this battle to the SNP in Holyrood. In the next Parliament we will:

• Demand an immediate independent inquiry into the farm payment debacle to ensure that in future Scottish farmers are not left wondering when, or even if, vital payments will reach them.
• Make sure that in future, when the option for making early payments is made available from the European Commission, that option is taken up.
In cooperation with our UK and EU colleagues, the Scottish Conservatives will:

- Push for the development of an EU dairy futures market, similar to those that already exist for grain and sugar.
- Call for increased transparency in the dairy supply chain across Europe to help ensure farmers are being treated openly and fairly and to provide consumers with greater certainty about where the milk in dairy products comes from.
- Call for immediate action to open new markets and reduce tariffs into existing export markets.
- Build on best practice in the industry, provide better promotion of our world class products, and boost support for local producers from the public sector including government departments, schools and hospitals.

Promoting Balanced Land Reform

The SNP’s Land Reform Act has dominated much of the rural agenda over the last Parliament. There are elements of the land reform agenda that Scottish Conservatives have supported - improved transparency of land ownership will help to tackle tax avoidance for example - but we will continue to stand up against measures that undermine individual property rights.

We support community empowerment - in fact much of the Community Empowerment Act 2015 is based on UK Government localism legislation - but are concerned that Land Reform Act proposals prioritise community ownership over good land management. In addition, several agricultural holdings clauses were inserted contrary to any evidence received by the Parliament and may well have the exact opposite effect - with even less tenanted land in Scotland.

In the next Parliament, Scottish Conservatives would:

- Support opening the Scottish Land Fund to long lease funding for communities. Community buyouts are not the only form of land use - sometimes long leases are preferable to communities as well as landowners.
- Explore reintroducing business rate relief to sporting estates which manage their environment and wildlife to a high standard.
- Reject an Absolute Right to Buy.
- Change ‘91 tenancy assignation to a conversion model which would allow secure tenants convert into at least 25-year Limited Duration Tenancies and then assign for value.
- Introduce planning system exemptions to allow retiring farmers or new entrants to build a home on agricultural land.

Fighting for our Fishing Communities

The Scottish fishing industry is facing many challenges across all its various sectors. From the introduction of Marine Protected Areas on the west coast to the new European Union discard ban for our white fish and pelagic fleets to the increasingly competitive and shrinking market for mackerel. The Scottish Conservatives are committed to fighting for the best deal for our fishermen at a European, UK and Scottish level.

No fisherman wants to discard fish. However, under EU’s Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), to remain within the law, fishermen were left with no choice. The EU’s recent discard ban has proven to be a particularly blunt tool of management. Ian Duncan MEP took part in the negotiations and managed to improve several of the less workable elements of the policy including ensuring that Member States would be encouraged to support the transition for fishermen and shore side organisations- something the SNP has refused to do.
In addition to this, in December the SNP/Green group in the Fisheries Committee almost forced cod into the list of discard species - a year early. Cod is a choke species and work is still ongoing to find a way around how its introduction could severely damage the ability of the white fish fleet to land other species. Ian Duncan and his Conservative colleagues in the European Parliament acted swiftly and decisively and overturned the decision putting off for another year the introduction on cod into the ban.

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) aim to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems and sea beds through restriction of human activities. At heart the MPA ambition is worthy. However, the consultation and implementation of the restrictions in Scotland have left much to be desired. Fishermen and fishing communities on the west coast of Scotland have been at the sharp end of the Scottish Government’s blunt approach. The SNP has got this wrong. Its proposals have ignored time and again the impact of their proposals on the social and economic fabric of often isolated communities.

The Clyde Fishermen’s Association have been at the forefront of fighting these cumbersome proposals that go above and beyond any scientific regulation and have been working with Scottish Conservatives in Holyrood who raised this issue and fought the arbitrary introduction.

We support our fishing industry. Therefore the Scottish Conservatives will:

- Do everything to reduce the burden on our fishing industry and utilise the full power given to the Scottish Government to help our fishermen comply with this new regulation currently forcing the biggest change in how we fish in generations.
- Conduct a review of the way they MPAs were decided on and implement them in a fairer, more balanced and scientifically proven way.

**Improving Rural Connectivity**

Scotland is the most beautiful country in the world and we are all rightly proud to call it home. We have hundreds of natural wonders sitting on our doorstep – no matter where in Scotland we live. Our landscape attracts millions of tourists every single year, employing hundreds of thousands of Scots and making a contribution worth billions of pounds to our economy.

That’s precisely why the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party supports the creation of further National Parks across Scotland. They would not only help protect some of our best landscape, but would also help attract more tourists and support local businesses. Our natural environment can only be supported through sustainable communities across Scotland and that’s why it is crucial to develop better digital infrastructure and invest in good transport links.

For far too long, Scotland’s rural communities have been overlooked when it comes to proper infrastructure investment. The lack of superfast broadband in much of our countryside hampers small rural businesses wanting to grow; the proliferation of mobile phone ‘not-spots’ outwith our towns and cities blights the lives of people trying to stay connected in the 21st century; road investment and rail improvements in rural Scotland are drastically underfunded compared to the Central Belt.

The UK and Scottish Governments are today spending over £400 million in Scotland to improve connectivity to superfast broadband and to date, more than two million homes and businesses have been linked to the superfast network, including 220,000 premises in Scotland.
But we need to go further. The introduction of a Universal Service Obligation for broadband by 2020 announced by our UK colleagues - and originally recommended by our Rural Commission - will mean a step change in broadband access in Scotland. In the meantime, doubling and reprofiling Community Broadband Scotland to support individuals, businesses and charities too, would go a long way to supporting some of the most hard-to-reach areas.

The A82 in Argyll and the Highlands, the A75 in the south west (bypassing Springholm and Crocketford), and the A90 in the north east are all major trunk roads connecting vital centres of tourism, commerce and industry in their respective areas. Upgrading each of these would provide a huge boost to residents, visitors and businesses in their area.

Rail investment in Scotland is lagging behind the rest of the UK too. We need to see progress on bigger projects like high-speed rail, improvements between Aberdeen and the Central Belt and a feasibility study on a direct link between Perth and Edinburgh, as well as smaller, but locally invaluable projects like a suburban Edinburgh South railway and the restoring of Reston and East Linton stations. Scottish Conservative elected representatives and candidates have campaigned on these projects for many years and will continue to do so in the next Parliament.

Buses are a lifeline for rural communities so we will increase support for community transport schemes. Community - and charity - run buses are essential to rural Scotland. For older people especially, these are often the only direct link to health care as well as friends, family or recreation. The funding for community transport schemes is patchy and inconsistent at best, with a comprehensive national strategy absent. By aligning the bus pass scheme with the State Pension Age, we can significantly increase investment in community transport as well as extend the bus pass scheme to these providers.

To bring more people to rural Scotland, we would:

- Expand the number of National Parks in Scotland.
- Prioritise and accelerate rural superfast broadband rollout. Reliable broadband access it vital for rural Scotland – for families, businesses and the third sector.
- Work with UK colleagues to introduce a Universal Service Obligation on broadband by the end of the decade.
- Transform the Community Broadband Scotland scheme into a Rural Broadband Fund, double the amount of its funding and refocus it so that it offers support to individuals, businesses, third sector and communities which have not yet been reached by the superfast rollout.
- Fund improvements to the A82, A75 and A90 as well as expanded rail infrastructure investment.
- Extend the bus pass scheme beyond commercial operators to include community transport.
- Create a start-up transport capital fund to help with the initial costs of new community transport projects.
Restoring Local Accountability

The increasing creep of centralisation under the SNP has been a worrying development for many of our local communities. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the SNP’s centralised police service. Revelations surrounding armed police and stop and search have made it quite clear that there are serious issues with the accountability of the new single police force and exposed the flaws with a one-size-fits-all system. We back a full review of the national police force to ensure it is fully accountable to rural communities. There are different options we should explore, some structural and others in improving oversight and planning arrangements. Ultimately, it is up to local communities to decide what works best.

The planning system is another example where the wishes of local communities are often overridden by central government priorities. This has been most apparent over the last few years with the spread of onshore wind developments across the countryside, where all too often planning decisions were overturned on appeal centrally.

When local councils demanded a moratorium on wind farm applications in the past, the SNP said this would be an “unprecedented step in Scottish planning practice”. With a moratorium on shale gas exploration now in place, the precedent has been set and the Scottish Conservatives will argue that if councils want to put a wind farm moratorium in place, they should be allowed to do so.

Scottish Conservatives are calling for:

• A proper accountability review of Police Scotland to ensure trust is restored across our local communities.
• The power to introduce a moratorium on further wind farm applications if local communities and councils ask for it.

Providing More Affordable Rural Homes

It has never been more important to provide affordable homes in our rural areas. Far too often, young people who would make a positive contribution to their rural communities are forced to leave their homes due to lack of housing or unaffordable rents.

Fiscal and non-fiscal incentives that help rural private owners bring properties into the affordable sector would have an exponentially positive effect. The Scottish Government, for example, has the power to introduce conditional LBTT supplement exemptions for private buy-to-let investors who would have to offer affordable rents.

Rural property owners could also be incentivised through long term rent guarantee schemes, where they provide long-term affordable housing in exchange for guaranteed rent income, paid even if the property goes empty for a period of time.

Existing stock will always only be a part of the solution – we need to look at how to support community and private developers interested in affordable housing. The newly announced Rural Housing Fund is a good start, but we need to ensure it provides a sustained level of funding for smaller developers in rural areas.

The Scottish Conservatives will promote:

• Incentives for rural property owners and buyers to encourage them to provide affordable housing.
• The introduction of affordable housing rent lock schemes and a properly funded rural housing grant.
• Measures to allow developers and owners to work on empty properties that could be brought back or converted to be used as affordable housing.