

A STRONG OPPOSITION - A STRONGER SCOTLAND

Scottish Conservative 2016 Manifesto

Clear Print Version

Foreword by Ruth Davidson

This is not a normal foreword, nor is this a normal manifesto.

That's because this isn't a normal election.

In a normal election, all of the parties set out their stall for what they would do in government - what their priorities are for action, what laws they would pass and what policies they would deliver.

As much as I would like to imagine myself First Minister in a few weeks' time, with my new cabinet around me; I know that this is not the job the majority of Scotland's voters have in mind for me on May 5th.

It is clear that the SNP are on course to win the Scottish election.

Instead, I'm applying for another job. Because there is an important vacancy in Scottish public life that I, along with my team, are best placed to fill.

And that is the vacancy for a strong opposition. It is a vacancy that has been lying open now for nine years, with Labour leader after Labour leader failing in the post.

A strong opposition results in better government. I believe I can make a positive contribution to Scotland's public life and political discourse by stepping up to become the main opposition leader in this country.

To do that, I need people who don't usually vote Conservative to help me. Indeed, I may need people who have never voted Conservative before to do just that.

For some, that will be a big step.

But to those who want to ensure that strong opposition they know our country needs, I make this promise: If you vote for me and my team, then I will do a specific job for you.

- I will hold the SNP to account.
- I will fight against any attempts to drag our country back to a second independence referendum.
- And I will make the Scottish Government focus on the issues that matter to you.

I will take the responsibility of this post seriously and serve with every ounce of determination, skill, tenacity and moral courage that I possess.

I will not merely complain from the sidelines, but rather I will challenge, scrutinise and propose alternatives.

I have a whole team behind me – many of whom are completely new to politics – who will bring real experience and expertise from the outside world into the Holyrood chamber.

They come from all backgrounds and professions, but are united in a belief in service and in duty.

They, like me, will always stand up for Scotland's place in our United Kingdom.

They, like me, want to leave the divisions of the past behind and build a better Scotland.

And they, like me, will dedicate themselves to being the strong opposition our country needs.

At this election, the voters of this country won't just be asked to decide the government.

They'll be asked to decide the opposition too.

I can be the strong opposition this country needs.

I ask for your vote.

Saying NO to a Second Referendum

To get better government, Scotland needs a strong opposition which will stand up against the SNP's drive for independence.

Ruth Davidson and her strong Scottish Conservative team have one over-riding priority in this election: to speak up for everyone who wants Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom, and say NO to a second referendum.

That task is ever more necessary. The SNP is on course to win a third term in office – and has already said it plans to start a fresh campaign for independence this summer.

Alone among the pro-UK parties, we are 100% behind Scotland's place in the United Kingdom. A strong Conservative opposition at Holyrood will campaign every day to make sure our decision in 2014 is respected.

There are four key facts at this election:

1. The SNP are on course to win this election. And the First Minister has said she will launch a new drive for independence this summer, instead of focusing on being a better government. So the crucial decision for voters at this election is who can lead a strong opposition to hold the SNP to account.
2. Labour are in a mess. Labour are not up to the job of holding the SNP to account. Labour have taken Scotland for granted for far too long. Riddled by infighting and incompetence and undermined by weak leadership they cannot provide the strong opposition Scotland needs.
3. Labour and the Liberal Democrats will allow their MSPs to campaign for independence. And now the Labour leader, Kezia Dugdale, has told us she could vote for independence herself. That means they can't possibly hold the SNP to account and keep them in check.
4. The only way to secure a strong opposition which holds the SNP to account, say NO to a second referendum and ensure we get better government is to vote for Ruth Davidson's Scottish Conservatives.

Scotland voted No by a clear margin in 2014. Events since have suggested that, had it voted Yes, the country would be starting life with an annual deficit of £15 billion, the highest on the entire European continent as a proportion of GDP. The decision we made to vote No has ensured that hospitals, schools and transport networks continue to be maintained. It is vital for future generations that we continue to make the case for our United Kingdom.

The referendum on independence pulled families, colleagues and communities apart. Scotland spoke and the question should now be settled for a generation. However, the SNP has said it wants to pursue its separation campaign for the next five years.

This is a clear breach of the Edinburgh Agreement, which tied both sides in the referendum to "respect" the result. Worse, it will create further uncertainty in Scotland and will prevent better government.

The Scottish Government should focus on the issues that affect us every day – improving our health service, creating better schools, and building a more secure country for us all. Instead, reading standards have declined, our farming communities have suffered from the SNP's IT fiasco, and the move to a centralised police force hasn't worked.

Scotland needs a Scottish Government focussed on the things that matter. A strong, principled opposition will fight every day to get the SNP to focus on running the country.

As a result of the SNP's proposals, we will commit at this election to redouble our efforts to protect our place in the United Kingdom and ensure the country does not have to undergo a re-run of the referendum of 2014.

- We will oppose any attempt by the SNP to hold a 2nd referendum during this parliament – no matter the result of the EU referendum this June.
- We will support a fresh, positive drive to promote the benefits of the Union. In our view, this should not focus on the downsides of independence - though there are many - but on the strength and values of the Union.
- We will support the creation of a new UK-wide effort to promote the strengths and values of the Union, fostering greater ties and solidarity across the entire United Kingdom.

Holding the SNP to Account

To get better government, Scotland needs a strong opposition which will hold the Scottish Government to account.

As a majority government for the last five years, the SNP has not been properly held to account. Instead of focusing on the job of government, it has used much of its time in office to focus on the independence referendum. Even when it has focused on its devolved responsibilities, the Scottish Parliament has too often failed to provide the necessary scrutiny and challenge to it. At the same time, the SNP Government has sought to take power away from communities and centralise it in Edinburgh.

The consequence has been bad laws and flawed government decision-making. The failed introduction of Police Scotland and the passing of the Named Persons legislation are two notable examples which have failed to command public confidence – but which passed through Holyrood relatively unheeded. Recently, the complete breakdown of the SNP's IT system for paying farmers has starved our rural economy of tens of millions of pounds.

These were all avoidable errors – but which were allowed to pass because of the combination of an over-mighty government and a weakened main opposition party.

The SNP is on course to win this election, and will seek to try and dominate public life as before – indeed, it has proposed a fresh campaign for independence this summer. Scotland therefore needs a principal opposition party which can keep the

SNP in check and hold them to account. In nine years as the main opposition party, Scottish Labour has run through six leaders and, following the collapse of its support base at Westminster, it is clearly incapable of doing so. With the Liberal Democrats now effectively a minor party in Scotland, it is down to Ruth Davidson and the Scottish Conservatives to perform that job of opposing the SNP.

As such, this manifesto sets out our ten point programme for opposition, with the priorities we intend to pursue should we become the main opponent of the SNP after May's elections. They are chosen as the public's priorities and are designed to ensure there is a clear challenge to the SNP Government over the coming years. These are the issues on which we will focus our efforts as an opposition party over the next five years.

We are clear about the task we want to perform on behalf of people in Scotland, no matter their political beliefs. It is to help ensure that – through challenge and scrutiny – all Scots get the better government they want. This is something that is ever more important as, within the next 12 months, the Parliament becomes the most powerful of its kind anywhere in the world.

Our Programme For Opposition

1. Protecting family finances. We will build the case for fair and competitive income taxes in Scotland. We will form a Shadow Council of Economic Advisers to provide continuing advice on tax decisions made by the Scottish Government. This will be based on the core principle of our Tax Commission; that income tax should not be any higher than the rest of the UK in Scotland, and lower when affordable. Our proposal will provide a counterweight to our opponents' plans to increase income taxes, offering a more balanced debate and better decision making.

2. Protecting NHS spending and boosting mental health support. The NHS is the public's top priority and we will demand that NHS funding is increased by 2%, inflation or Barnett Consequentials – whichever is higher. We will also call for a significant increase in support for mental health services. To ensure progress in long-term organisational change, we will seek to work constructively with government to find consensus when it is required.

3. Backing vocational education and reversing college cuts. We will build the case for boosting funds for our Further Education Colleges and providing more support for training and skills. The SNP has slashed college budgets and reduced places by 152,000. The FE sector has for too long been treated as a second-class service in post-16 education and a Scottish Conservative opposition will pressure the Scottish Government to put in place a comprehensive plan to increase spending.

4. Reversing the Named Persons law and setting up a new Crisis Family Fund in its place. One of our first priorities will be to call immediately for the repeal of the Named Persons provisions which have now lost public confidence. We argue that support for vulnerable children should be more focussed, so we will demand that funds are diverted to a new Crisis Family Fund – to support projects across Scotland which offer early intervention, help troubled families, and provide tailored support.

5. Empowering school leaders and ensuring every child can read well. Over the last parliament, we have pushed the SNP to accept standardised testing for pupils and to tackle Scotland's shocking attainment gap. We want to do more. We will campaign to give schools, teachers and parents more freedom so that every school has the chance to become a unique and great local school – in or out of local authority control. We will also push for better and earlier literacy and numeracy support in nursery and primary school, as we know that these skills are crucial for our children's future.

6. Making childcare more flexible and extending hours for younger children. The Scottish Government has proposed offering 30 hours of childcare a week, mostly for 3 and 4 year olds. We will push the case for offering more of these hours to 1 and 2 year olds, particularly those from deprived communities. This is the best investment we can make in cutting the attainment gap and ensuring children from poorer families start school on an equal footing.

7. Supporting growth and halving the disability employment gap. The transfer of significant tax and welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament heralds a new era of devolution. We need to use these responsibly and with a clear purpose. Our taxes

should be competitive and fair and help boost employment across Scotland. Our welfare system should support our most vulnerable and help those who want to work find employment through ongoing support.

8. Tackling anti-social behaviour and focusing prisons on rehabilitation.

Keeping communities safe will always be a priority for us. We pushed the SNP into hiring additional police officers, but now we must allow them to get on with the job instead of filling back office vacancies. We will also push for a thorough review of purposeful activity in prisons to ensure that they offer the best rehabilitation opportunities alongside protection of the public.

9. Building 100,000 new homes and rebuilding empty properties. Government has done much to help people buy homes in the last five years; now we need to do more to increase the number of homes available. House-builders are ready to start laying bricks and mortar, but Government needs to support them with better regulations, streamlined planning and improved infrastructure. We will demand that the Scottish Government takes a grip and ensures that we see a real homebuilding revolution in the next five years.

10. Ensure no-one lives in a hard to heat home and reduce fuel poverty. With over a third of household struggling to heat their homes, we will make the case for a transformative investment in energy efficiency across Scotland. Thousands of jobs would be created in all corners of Scotland, homes will be easier to heat, households save on their energy bills - all whilst reducing carbon emissions.

Some of our New Candidates

DEAN LOCKHART

I am the youngest of three kids. I grew up on a council estate and attended local schools. I was the first in my family to go to University (Glasgow).

After University, I spent 25 years working in businesses across the world including London, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore. I also spent a year as a Senior Diplomat at the British Embassy to promote British Trade.

I want to bring this business and economic experience to Holyrood at a time when the Scottish Parliament is getting significant new 'tax-and-spend' powers.

I have seen how good government policy can create better lives for everyone through economic expansion and job creation – and spending the extra government income on improved health, education and other public services.

I have two children. I am a single-parent after losing my wife to cancer last year. After this, I decided to devote my time to public service.

I truly believe in a strong NHS and public services. To do this best, we need the strongest possible economy. The Scottish Conservative Party is the only party that can be trusted to grow the economy.

And being a central part of the UK gives us the long-term economic security we need to fund these essential public services.

That's why I am standing as a Candidate for Ruth Davidson's Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

ADAM TOMKINS

I've been an academic lawyer since 1991. I moved from Oxford to Glasgow in 2003 and now I'm married with four young children here. When the independence referendum was looming I decided to get involved in Scottish politics for the first time.

At the beginning of the referendum campaign I had no party affiliation-I've never wanted to see the break-up of Britain, but I would have worked happily with any party committed to the Union. As time went by, however, I realised that there is only one such party, the Scottish Conservatives, so I signed up.

Since then, I started advising the UK Government and the Scottish Conservatives about legal aspects of secession and the law relating to devolution. Then I decided I wanted to stand as an MSP. If elected, my priorities - as well as the constitutional question - will focus on schools policy, education reform, city regional devolution, and offering the robust, principled opposition to the Nationalists in the Scottish Parliament that only Ruth Davidson's party can provide.

KIRSTENE HAIR

I strongly believe we should stand up for what we believe in. I don't believe in just complaining- I get stuck in and fight to make things better. I am Scottish through and through. I was born and brought up here and work in this fantastic Country but feel it is being failed by the SNP government. Their obsession with a second referendum and short term political point scoring have been to the detriment of our Country - patients requiring health care are suffering, young people in education are suffering and victims desperate for a higher level of justice are suffering. We need a Party that is truly stronger for Scotland.

I was raised to believe that, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Nothing worthwhile comes easily - there is simply no substitute for hard work and perseverance. In each and every decision in life, I stand by Conservative values and passionately believe we are the only Party that can bring about positive change. I am delighted to see so many more young people are coming on board too - the Scottish Conservatives are on the up.

ANNIE WELLS

I was born and brought up in Springburn, in the North East of Glasgow, where I still live with my son. My family was very traditional 'Labour' working class, my dad was a railway man and my mum was a cleaner. I was always told that the Labour party was the party for working class people, like us.

I then decided I wanted to look into the other political parties and what they stood for. I was clear that the party for hard working people, for aspiration and opportunity was the Scottish Conservative Party.

I am currently a manager with one of the UK's leading retailers and have been for the last twelve years. Politics has always been a passion for me, however it was brought to the fore during the referendum campaign. I stood in the 2015 General Election for Glasgow North East, and I proud to be standing as a candidate in Glasgow Provan for the Scottish Parliamentary elections and No2 on the Glasgow Regional list.

The reason I want to be an MSP is to be a voice for hard working Glaswegians, and bring the Conservative values to life.

I believe that everyone from every walk of life regardless of their background, should have the same opportunities in life. That's why I believe in the Scottish Conservatives.

MEGHAN GALLAGHER

Throughout my life I have lived, worked and been educated within North Lanarkshire, an area which is not a Conservative stronghold. I come from a council house background in Holytown where my parents have always taught me the importance of working hard and achieving your own goals. I believe the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party stands up for those who want to aspire and achieve, to give themselves and their family a better life.

During my last year at the University of the West of Scotland, I joined the North Lanarkshire association. It was through studying the party I realised I was a Conservative. It did come as a bit of a surprise. Given my background, the area in which I grew up, I would never have linked my political views with the Conservative Party. My gran and my late granddad both support the Scottish Conservatives, however, my own parents do not share their views. And to this day, my friends still tell me on a regular basis my image does not resemble a Conservative... But what does?

I have always stood up for what I believe in. And I believe in the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. Watching our party grow in strength makes me proud to be part of Ruth Davidson's team. As a young woman, I feel it is particularly important to show that there is a place for everyone in our party regardless of where you come from or your alternative image.

A Scottish Conservative and Unionist Approach

1. A Scottish Parliament that works for you

Top priorities

- Using our tax powers to create a competitive and fair Scotland
- Supporting the most vulnerable with Scottish welfare powers
- Ensuring our two governments work together

Why we need a strong opposition

Our Parliament is becoming one of the most powerful devolved institutions in the world. The Scotland Act 2016 allows us to make different choices in virtually all of domestic policy and work in the spirit of cooperation with UK governments to the benefit of all. And yet, this will never be enough for the SNP. This party exists for one purpose alone - to break up the United Kingdom. As long as they keep threatening the Union, we will stand up for the 2 million No voters who kept our country together. This also means reforming scrutiny arrangements in the Scottish Parliament, which was never designed for an absolute majority government.

The powers of the Scottish Parliament are vast and they need to be used responsibly. Wrong decisions on taxation can deter investment and jobs and cost us tens of millions of pounds. The SNP has confirmed they want to make Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom - with income tax, stamp duty and business rates all set to rise above what our neighbours have to pay. We can't let the SNP hang a "Higher Taxes Here" sign at the border and allow them to be dragged even further left by Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

A Powerhouse Parliament

Following the passing of the Scotland Act 2016, our Scottish Parliament is becoming a powerhouse institution, with control over billions of pounds in taxation, welfare, health and education. This gives us great opportunities to design policy that suits Scotland. It does, however, also mean that we need to use our powers responsibly. If we make the wrong choices on tax, we could put thousands of jobs on the line by discouraging investment and job creation. If we don't improve our education system, we create barriers and not opportunities for our children. If we don't design the Scottish welfare system properly, we will be letting down the most vulnerable in our society.

It is therefore crucial that decisions taken at the Scottish Parliament are challenged and scrutinised thoroughly. While it goes without saying that a stronger opposition can do this better, our unicameral Parliament was never designed for an absolute majority. The last five years have repeatedly shown the SNP railroad reports through Parliamentary Committees and legislation through the Chamber. Our own Strathclyde Commission made suggestions on how to improve legislative scrutiny and we will continue to make the case for these.

We don't think a second Parliamentary chamber is desirable, but changes to the Parliamentary Questions system allowing opposition spokespeople to question ministers weekly or key committees chaired by opposition nominees - potentially elected by fellow MSPs - would significantly improve accountability. The strengthened remit of the Scottish Fiscal Commission is welcome, but we need to keep its operation under review to ensure it is fully independent and sufficiently well-resourced to provide robust public finance scrutiny.

The constitutional debate of the last few years has put the spotlight on the powers of the Scottish Parliament, but public awareness of the split between reserved and devolved powers remains worryingly low. We believe that the Scottish Government should work with HMRC to issue Scottish versions of personal tax statements which would not only show how individuals' income tax is being spent in Scotland, but would also highlight which policy areas are fully devolved.

Protecting Family Finances

The full devolution of income tax to Scotland means this is the first election in the Scottish Parliament's history that could see Scottish taxpayers worse off as a result of the choice we make. It could also lead to taxes being increased in the hope of raising more revenue, only to find confirmation of all the expert evidence showing the dangers of such an approach in a devolved setting. Scottish Conservatives are therefore clear - we need to design our tax system to be both fair and competitive.

We believe that Scottish taxpayers should not be asked to pay higher income tax than their friends and family in other parts of the UK. In contrast with our political opponents who want to increase taxes for every single worker (in the case of Labour and Liberal Democrats) or refuse to pass tax cuts on (in the case of the SNP), we want to lower the tax burden for everybody paying income tax. The personal allowance will rise to £11,500 from 2017/18 and we want to see the higher rate threshold reach £45,000 too. These plans mean an income tax cut for every income tax payer in Scotland.

Considering the circumstances at the time, the introduction of council tax has been a remarkable success. The tax is well understood, compliance is high and it provides a stable flow of revenue for local government. It is clear, however, that after 9 years of the council tax freeze, reform is necessary. We are flattered that the Scottish Government decided to take on board the recommendations of our Independent Commission for Competitive and Fair Taxation - reforming council tax into a fairer local tax, with additional protections for low income households across the bands. We support the ending of the freeze, with 3% annual limits. Scottish Conservatives will oppose the increased multiplier for bands E and F. However, we will support increases for bands G and H. It is right that those in the largest houses pay more, allowing us to raise an additional £30m for local services every year.

Councils, in particular in the North East of Scotland, have expressed concerns that the current local government funding mechanism does not treat them fairly. This issue has become particularly acute with the decline in the North Sea Oil and Gas industry, and additional demands on council services in that part of the country. We

believe it is time for a thorough, independent review of the funding mechanism for local government.

A Scottish Welfare System with a Purpose

The Scotland Act 2016 heralds a new era of devolution. While the new tax powers have received significantly more attention so far, the Act gives the Scottish Parliament unprecedented control over a Scottish welfare system too. It devolves most disability benefits, introduces new flexibilities in the main out of work benefit and allows for reserved benefits being topped up and new social security schemes to be set up too. Blaming UK governments is no longer the go-to answer - we can take a different path in Scotland if we choose to.

Scottish Conservatives want to see a Scottish welfare system with three basic principles at its heart - it should support the most vulnerable in our society, it should be flexible and personalised, and it should give those who can and want to work the opportunities and support to do just that. That's what we believe a welfare system should do and we will support policies that are anchored in these principles once the powers are devolved. In the first instance, and in preparation for devolution, the Scottish Government should start collecting data on a much more robust and localised basis to aid with the design of the system as well as its subsequent evaluation.

A personalised welfare system with individual claimants at its heart needs to be responsive and flexible. Administrative complexity, while unavoidable, should be minimised to allow, for example, the fast-tracking of support for people with a terminal illness. Extending flexibility to claimants also means giving them the choice over the frequency of payments, split payments and their housing benefit.

The devolution of most disability benefits to Scotland allows us to have a discussion about how we support some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Scottish Conservatives support aligning Carer's Allowance with Jobseeker's Allowance to support over 60,000 carers in Scotland, but we also need to explore more structural changes. With the integration of health and social care, we should explore whether Attendance Allowance and DLA/PIP should be a part of such an integrated system - either by devolving control further to local authorities/health boards or to the new health and social care partnerships. This would allow for a much more personalised and integrated approach and ultimately enhance health and well-being outcomes.

Employability support is another crucial policy area that is being devolved. The Work Choice programme in particular has benefitted over 5,000 disabled people in Scotland to find employment to date and we want this to continue. Latest statistics show that employment rates amongst disabled people are around 38% lower than for those not classed as disabled. For those who can't work, support must be protected. But for those who can and want to work, we should do more. Work Choice is entirely voluntary and provides targeted help with job searching, coaching and skills development. While the programme is being rolled into one with the Work Programme in England, we believe there is merit in focusing resources on dedicated employability support for the disabled, with a clear target of halving the disabled

employment gap in Scotland. A Work Choice successor programme with increased funding would therefore be one of our priorities.

Supporting families and children with an early intervention approach has cross-party backing. The Scottish Government's key policy in this area, however, has come under increasing pressure with more public awareness of its implications. Scottish Conservatives have opposed Named Persons from the beginning, tabling amendments throughout the legislative process which would have limited the scope and duration of the scheme, as well as allowing an opt-out for concerned parents. All such proposals were voted down by opposition parties. We will continue to argue that Named Persons should be scrapped.

Not only are there philosophical objections to the Named Person scheme, but there are serious concerns about how resources should be targeted. Scottish Conservatives believe these would be much better spent on a targeted programme of support in some of Scotland's most deprived communities - a £10m Crisis Family Fund. This would involve identifying families with complex needs and providing tailored support to them directly on a payment-by-results basis - this could range from helping with school attendance and reoffending through mental health and substance abuse to tackling domestic violence and providing relationship support. We would aim to help at least 10,000 families over the course of the next Parliament.

Scotland has played an important part in promoting equalities and social and environmental justice around the world. The Scotland Malawi Partnership has been one of the best examples of what Scotland can achieve in an international arena and we should continue to support the International Development Fund, increasing it to £10m every year.

2. A better start in life for your children

Top priorities

- Extending flexible, high-quality childcare
- Empowering our school leaders
- Focusing on vocational education and reversing college cuts

Why we need a strong opposition

Nowhere is the record of this Scottish Government more exposed than in education, especially in the persistent differences in life chances between the affluent and deprived areas of Scotland. Staggeringly, a pupil from an affluent background is seven times more likely to achieve 3 'A' grades at Higher level than their deprived peers. Only one in ten of Scotland's young people from the 20% most deprived communities go to university versus one in five in England. 29% of schools in the most deprived areas are rated "weak" or "unsatisfactory", compared to a 10% average across Scotland. Attainment in literacy and numeracy in schools has fallen, with the most recent surveys showing skills in reading and writing attainment reducing across all examined year groups in the latest statistics. There are over 4,000 fewer teachers since the SNP came to power and 152,000 college places

have been lost, removing opportunities for some of the most vulnerable learners. At university, the SNP have cut bursaries for the most deprived students by over £40m and its free tuition policy is making universities increasingly uncompetitive. Scottish Conservatives have focused on education policy ever since the advent of devolution. In the last few months alone we have seen the Scottish Government adopt our policies on standardised testing, the attainment fund going directly to schools and a First Minister's Reading Challenge. We will continue to make evidence-based arguments and keep the pressure up - a strong opposition for a stronger Scotland.

Flexible and high-quality childcare

The gap in the life chances of children from poorer and more affluent backgrounds begins to open up at a very early age. It is therefore right that we invest in high-quality childcare, alongside other early intervention schemes outlined elsewhere in this document. Scottish Conservatives have consistently argued that free childcare provision should be targeted primarily at children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Scottish Government plans to double childcare provision for all 3 and 4 year olds and a small proportion of 2 year olds. We believe the priority should be to extend hours to a higher proportion of disadvantaged 2 year olds and disadvantaged 1 year olds in the first instance, with a gradual expansion of part-time hours to all 1 to 4 year olds. This would ensure help is available early on, but would also close the current gap between statutory parental leave and free hours, with positive labour market impacts.

Extending the number of free hours, however, is only one side of the coin. Scottish Conservatives have long campaigned for the system to be much more flexible and responsive to parental demand. The most straightforward way to do this would be to give parents the freedom to use their entitlement whenever they need it at approved childcare providers, including registered childminders. This means childcare entitlement brought in line with modern working life. We have also tabled amendments to legislation that would address so-called birthday discrimination, which sees some families lose out on hundreds of pounds due to the entitlement only applying in the term after a child's birthday.

Gold Standard Schools

Over the last 17 years, the Scottish Conservatives at Parliament have put much emphasis on developing education policy and have been putting forward ideas that would improve Scottish education in the short, medium and long term. Our most recent policy paper, "The Gold Standard - A World Class Education for Every Child", included multiple policy suggestions, some of which have since been adopted by the Scottish Government. We will continue to make the case for an educational system based on diversity and choice in schools, real autonomy for school leaders and a focus on basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Empowering school leaders

Scottish Conservatives recognise and celebrate the many achievements of Scotland's schools which have served most pupils so well. We remain of the view that if there is demand, schools should not be prevented from operating outside of

Local Authority control. But we also believe that, within the present model, there is still huge scope for progress which does not require any major legislative reform. It is time to focus on the outcome, not the process: giving schools and school leaders real decision-making powers and the freedom to express their individual values, ethos and character.

The fact is that schools work best when they have a clear sense of mission and ethos, with strong leaders at every level: from the head teacher's office to the classroom. We need to focus on delivering this ideal. Many school leaders report frustration with the system and the lack of autonomy they have. We need a culture shift so that there is a clear presumption that power should lie at the level of the school. If there are state schools which wish to be autonomous when it comes to controlling budgets and recruitment policies, or want to exercise greater freedom over the day to day management of the school, they should be permitted to do so.

More autonomous schools could also organise themselves into "clusters" of primaries and secondaries to ensure a seamless education journey for children. Such clusters would have a single tier of management, with strong leaders given a chance to provide strategic direction for schools which currently lack any leadership at all. This may work particularly in rural areas where teacher shortages are most pronounced. We continue to support Gaelic education and would welcome further dedicated Gaelic schools being set up. Furthermore, we believe access to quality extra-curricular activity should be part of all pupils' school experience and we will urge the SNP to reverse its cuts to music tuition across Scotland.

Attracting the best teachers

The Scottish Conservatives want to recruit the best teachers for our schools. We should look to support the best high-achieving graduates who are interested in getting into teaching via the postgraduate route, especially in STEM subjects, by introducing a postgraduate teaching bursary, which would be retention-linked to Scottish state schools. We also support the introduction of a TeachFirst scheme that would place some of the brightest graduates into our most challenging schools. We also believe we need to pursue greater GTCS flexibility on this issue, including the ability to recruit fully accredited teachers from outside Scotland should this need arise.

Tackling the attainment gap

The attainment gap between children from poorer and richer backgrounds remains the biggest challenge in our educational system. Narrowing this gap should be the overarching aim of all political parties and the Scottish Conservatives have for years been making suggestions that we believe would go some way to improving this situation.

If we want to tackle the attainment gap, we need to be looking at appropriate support right from the beginning of a child's life. Scottish Conservatives support more flexible childcare, extended to more vulnerable one and two year olds. At school, in addition to a presumption of school control, we need to focus on attracting the best teachers to improve numeracy and literacy rates, with an ambitious target for the next two

Parliaments - we want every child to read well by age 11. We have previously suggested a First Minister's Reading Challenge and are pleased the Scottish Government has decided to take it forward. Best practice sharing as well as more focused training in numeracy and literacy teaching would also make a big difference. We have also welcomed the Scottish Government's attainment fund and we will continue to argue that it should go directly to schools with the money following the pupil, with more support for pupils with ASN and care leavers.

Supporting pupils

A pupil's experience at school will depend on many factors, but providing the right support network for the most vulnerable pupils goes a long way to ensuring all get the best possible start in life. That's why we have always supported additional funding to follow pupils with ASN as well as care leavers, which could be done via the existing attainment fund. We would also like to see more counselling available in secondary schools - something where Scottish schools are lagging behind the rest of the UK - reducing the pressure on CAMH services.

We also need to make further progress on equalities and discrimination at school. LGBT discrimination in particular has not received the attention it deserves. We think school inspections should specifically ask about school action on LGBT issues as opposed to simply broad equality matters. Dedicated reporting of LGBT incidents through SEEMiS should also be introduced. We also know that teachers are often unsure about how to tackle homophobic and transphobic bullying and we would therefore develop a toolkit in cooperation with the third sector that would give teachers the confidence to take a lead in this area.

Measuring progress

We welcome the Scottish Government's recent decision to reintroduce national testing in primary schools. It is an admission that the current system has not been good enough in creating clear, consistent and transparent data on the state of our schools. This problem has been identified by numerous reports examining Scottish education. We believe the Scottish Government needs to be far bolder in measuring progress in our education system. Only by measuring properly can we assess whether schools are meeting the gold standard parents want. The Scottish Government should commit to re-entering Scotland into all the main international education comparison tests: PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS and design the new standardised tests at P1, P4 and P7 to fit into these international methodologies. We should also improve evaluative research on what works, for example, by offering government match-funding to third sector educational charities and re-establish an independent inspectorate outwith Education Scotland.

Sustainable Further and Higher Education

Every university in Scotland is telling us it needs more money if they are to remain internationally competitive, widen access, provide improved support for bursaries and be able to stay at the cutting edge of research and knowledge exchange. This money could be found wholly from public spending – like cutting college funding even further – or from increased taxation. There is, however, a third option. Scottish

Conservatives believe the answer is a modest graduate contribution, payable once the graduate is earning a good salary rather than an upfront fee.

Setting the graduate contribution at £1,500 per year would allow us to raise around £100 million by the end of the Parliament and in the years after. We would keep exemptions in place for part-time, postgraduate, disabled and low income students and the contribution would not be payable until the graduate is earning at least £20,000. Aligning existing loans with this threshold would be a progressive move, helping the poorest students the most. Evidence from around the world shows that a graduate contribution not only unlocks more funding, but can in fact help with widening access by providing more bursaries and more places for the most disadvantaged students. That's what all policymakers should be aiming for. We will support plans to give full bursaries to care experienced young people.

We will also do everything we can to support the autonomy of the higher education sector, resisting any political interference, just as we have done during the SNP's most recent legislative proposals. We recognise the importance of the Open University for students who require a more flexible approach and we would therefore protect the part-time fee grant.

A staggering 152,000 college places have been lost across Scotland since the SNP came to power. This is symptomatic of a long-running prioritisation of academic qualifications over vocational ones. We disagree with this approach - we need to redress the balance and give equal weight to vocational education.

Not every pupil will desire to study at university and we need to ensure they have the opportunities to develop their talents, improve skills and gain meaningful qualifications. This requires cooperation with the private sector on skills need and training, providing more flexible secondary education and developing closer working relationships between business, schools and colleges. Fundamentally, we believe the SNP's college cuts from the last Parliament should be reversed immediately, with an additional £60m every year for the sector.

3. A world-class health care system for your loved ones

Top priorities

- Protecting NHS funding with a health guarantee
- Boosting mental health investment
- Putting patients in charge

Why we need a strong opposition

The NHS is one of our most cherished public institutions and yet the SNP failed to properly invest in our health service. While the NHS budget increased by 7% in England in the period 2010/11 - 2015/16, it only went up by 1% in Scotland. That's despite spending choices in England resulting in an additional £1.5bn in Barnett Consequentials flowing to the Scottish budget over the period. The growing culture of waiting times targets is putting additional pressure on NHS staff, with little

progress in some of the most important areas measured - cancer treatment time, outpatient appointments, mental health and A&E waiting times. In addition, our GPs have been raising significant concern over the budget allocations and expected staff shortages in the coming years.

Funding our NHS Properly

Scottish Conservatives have always been very clear that investing in our health service remains a priority, even during deficit-reduction. We propose to protect health spending in Scotland through a health guarantee - ensuring the health budget rises annually by whatever is highest out of inflation, 2% or Barnett Consequentials. Under current projections that would mean an additional £1.5 billion for our health service by the end of the Parliament, with the budget reaching £14.5bn by 2021/22.

The abolition of prescription charges for those who can afford them removed valuable funding from the frontline of the health service. Gradually reintroducing them would allow us to raise £65m by the end of the Parliament to invest in nurses, health visitors or GPs as well as improve access to new medicines. This assumes the same exemptions from the charge as before - children, pensioners, pregnant women, disabled people - but we would look to expand the list of long-term conditions which are exempt. Our objective should be sustainable and safe staffing levels across all health boards.

A health service there when you need it

Our health service works best when NHS staff can get on with the job they were trained to do. Many are now telling us that that the NHS is spending too much time worrying about politicians, and not enough time focusing on patients. Some targets have been successful in driving up performance and boosting accountability, but it's now clear that some are responsible for skewing clinical priorities and heaping pressure on medical staff. We want our doctors making the best medical decision for a successful outcome, rather than feeling they have to service the input targets. Scottish Conservatives therefore support a full review of targets to assess which ones help more people survive and get better, and which simply micro-manage clinicians' time and pull them away from prioritising the treatment their patients need.

While focusing on patient outcomes is the right approach, it is clear that waiting times across the health service are too long. This ranges from our A&E departments, through our GPs to delayed discharge in hospitals. Additional investment in capacity and staffing will help, but there are other changes that we will promote in the next Parliament. We believe pharmacies should be put at the heart of primary care. Researchers have estimated that over 1 in 10 GP consultations and 1 in 20 A&E attendances could have been managed by community pharmacists utilising the Minor Ailment Service. We will therefore support an expansion of the MAS by an additional £10m every year, with broader eligibility criteria, and aim to considerably raise public awareness of the scheme.

There is cross-party consensus on the need to develop a new model of primary care and some welcome steps have been taking towards this already. We support the

moves towards GP clusters, with additional freedoms for GPs within them. With the overall health budget due to increase annually over the course of the Parliament, we think that GP budgets should increase too and, in addition, the share of the budget that GPs get should also increase every year. Scottish Conservatives have a long-standing commitment to a universal GP-attached health visiting service, extended to age 7. In order to achieve this, we would hire an additional 500 health visitors over the next 4 years, above and beyond the SNP's present plans, and providing a considerable shift towards early intervention.

Putting patients in charge

We believe we all have to take care of our NHS. That means injecting an element of personal responsibility into the system too. We know, for example, that over 20,000 people enter emergency departments drunk and incapable every year at a cost running to millions of pounds. We have therefore supported the creation of a network of Recovery Centres, which would take referrals from ambulances and the police to alleviate A&E pressure. Combining such a service with alcohol dependency support would unlock additional long-term benefits. Improvements in notifying patients of their upcoming appointments as well as making bookings and cancellations easier must also be a part of the solution. In addition, we think further measures like allowing health boards and GPs to levy fines from those patients who miss their appointments three times without good grounds should be explored.

Putting more focus on personal responsibility also means that we need to improve the provision of information to patients, allowing them to make informed choices about their health. This should start by knowing where to access services and we believe that an annual statement could be issued alongside a household's council tax bill, which would include a summary and details of local health and social care services.

We should also examine how to give patients more control over their own health records and improve their involvement in their own care. We should be moving towards a "no decision about me without me" approach throughout our health care system. This would require developing procedures that see patients and clinicians working together, with much more weight given to patients' own experience of their illness and allowing them to co-decide on the location of or type of their treatment. The objective is to develop personalised treatments that suit individuals, alongside making access to specialised care easier.

A step-change in mental health support

There is a growing recognition across Scotland that we need to embark on a step-change in mental health support. A staggering one in four of all Scots experience a mental health problem, sometimes with knock-on effects on physical health, personal relationships as well as work. Waiting times for treatment are still incredibly high, with up to a third of people having to wait for over four and a half months in some health boards. This is simply unacceptable. We need to start moving towards parity of esteem between mental and physical health, with targeted funding and policy towards achieving a fundamental change in how we support those with mental health problems.

The next mental health strategy should be a long-term 10-year delivery plan to achieve this objective. As a start, we will argue for an additional £300 million to be invested in improving mental health treatment over the next Parliament. This should be used to improve capacity and staffing across the health service, with an ambition to provide dedicated mental health support in every GP surgery and every A&E department 24/7. Additional support should be directed to social prescribing - both in the development of innovative social prescribing networks and in the information available to GPs on services in their local area to which they can then refer patients. Scottish Conservatives have also supported the Frank's Law campaign and will continue to put pressure on the Scottish Government to increase support for dementia sufferers under 65.

An integrated approach to health and social care

We have supported the integration of health and social care from the outset and are pleased to see the approach rolled out in full. We will monitor the new health and social care partnerships carefully to ensure the reforms are delivering their objectives. The devolution of a range of disability benefits allows us to go even further. Scottish Conservatives agree with COSLA that we should explore whether there is merit in devolving disability benefits (DLA/PIP/AA) more locally - either to health boards, local authorities or the new partnerships. Such an approach would allow the creation of personalised care packages tailored to each individual's condition.

This should go hand in hand with increased support for our unpaid carers. Our amendments to the Carers Act have secured the delivery of short breaks for carers, something we have campaigned on for years. We have also led the way in calling for Carer's Allowance to be increase to the level of Jobseeker's Allowance and will hold the Scottish Government to their pledge on this.

Integration, however, goes beyond just health and social care. Joint working and information sharing can significantly improve the outcomes for patients even further. We should, for example, work with housing associations across Scotland to tackle delayed discharge in our hospitals. Patients can get trapped in wards because their homes need adapted for their return. Housing associations often have suitable properties, with a support network in place, which they could set aside at a fraction of the cost of a ward place to accommodate those who temporarily can't return home. Better data sharing with pharmacies just before discharge can also speed up the process.

Developing partnerships between the ambulance service, health and social care services and the third sector can also improve end of life care and we should pilot such Partnership for Excellence in Palliative Support (PEPS) services in Scotland. We will continue to support joint working with the third sector in all areas, in particular the successful Transforming Care After Treatment programme.

A healthier start in life through sport

Developing a relationship with sport starts at school and much has been said about the number of hours of PE on offer. Just as important, however, is the quality of PE and the activities that are on offer in schools and we believe more specialists are required, particularly in primary schools. The benefits of extending outdoor education to all pupils are very clear and we believe that at least once in the top year of primary or early secondary school, pupils should be able to take advantage of one week's residential outdoor education. In addition, schools should make it easier for community groups to access their facilities after school hours.

Football is our national sport and the lifeblood of many communities. We believe more needs to be done to improve the football visitor experience as well as to unlock wider public health benefits of youth sport. We have opposed the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications Act from the outset and believe the evidence on its ineffectiveness is very clear. It should be repealed immediately. We also want to work with clubs to pilot the reintroduction of safe and controlled alcohol consumption at football, and investigate several options on how this could be done to the benefit of clubs and supporters.

In cooperation with clubs and relevant authorities, we should also explore the idea of financial incentives for football clubs across Scotland's top four divisions to play young Scottish players, within set limits to prevent unintended consequences. This funding should in turn be committed to facilities, training and infrastructure improvement which would all be linked to youth sport. Not only would such a scheme incentivise clubs to play young Scots, it would also mean additional funding for community sporting benefits. The merits from a public health and social perspective would be plain to see, particularly as many football clubs are based in deprived communities with poorer health outcomes.

4. A warm home for your family

Top priorities

- Building 100,000 new homes over the next Parliament
- Investing in secure, clean and affordable energy
- Ensuring no-one lives in a hard to heat home

Why we need a strong opposition

One of the casualties of the global recession in Scotland has been house-building. While the latest statistics show some improvement, we are still significantly behind pre-recession levels that we need to get back to. Our planning system is still very unresponsive in parts and the cause of significant delay in construction projects. The Scottish Government's stamp duty reforms have also had a significant impact on the middle and upper sections of the market and the latest statistics suggest a shortfall of around £40m versus budgeted forecasts. It was Scottish Conservative pressure that softened the original proposal, which would have had an even more detrimental effect on receipts. On climate change, the Scottish Government failed to meet its

own climate change targets for four years in a row now and is on course to miss its fuel poverty target, with 35% of Scottish households still living in fuel poverty.

Building More Homes for Scotland

Policymakers have spent the last five years focusing on stimulating demand for house-buying, which is something we have welcomed. In fact, it was hard work by the Scottish Conservatives which resulted in the introduction of the Help to Buy mortgage guarantee scheme. After five years of focusing on demand, however, we need to shift focus to supply. Over the next five years, we want to see a 10% year-on-year increase in new house completions across all sectors to return to around 25,000 new homes being built every year by the end of the decade. In total, this would mean an additional 100,000 homes over the next five years.

We would envisage around half of these - 50,000 - to be affordable homes across different tenure types. To this end, we want to see the investment rate for housing associations protected and work with them on the delivery of further homes. We would not extend the Right to Buy to housing associations and want to ensure they can attract investment on open markets. The delivery of affordable housing will also depend on cooperation with the private sector on innovative mid-market rent models. This could include providing grant funding to private landlords to build new properties in exchange for them letting the property out at affordable rents for a set period of time. Similar rent-lock arrangements should be pursued with existing properties too, where landlords receive a set guaranteed mid-market rent in exchange for providing the property to be used for housing list allocations. For new buy-to-let investors the new LBTT supplement should be waived in exchange for entering such a rent-lock scheme.

We also believe that the constraints on housing allocation that arise from central legislation should be removed. 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 flexibility they need to meet the priorities of their individual areas.

Delivering an additional 100,000 homes will require a concerted effort across several portfolio areas. One of the most crucial areas is the planning system, which is still the source of much frustration amongst both builders and local communities. It is currently under review, but without pre-empting the results of this, it is clear that the system needs to be significantly sped up. This will require additional resource, but we should also explore options of linking planning fees to the performance of planning departments.

We also think local authorities should compile publicly-accessible brownfield land registers to allow house-builders explore their options more easily. A presumption to build on brownfield land should also be introduced for applications with a major housing element. Not all housing is delivered by large construction companies and policy needs to incentivise smaller builders too as well as making it significantly

easier for self-builders or innovative off-site construction. Serviced plots, with infrastructure pre-built and land made available to small builders and self-build, should also be spread across Scotland. We are pleased to see the introduction of a Rural Housing Fund - first called for by our own Rural Commission - and we will ensure it provides a sustained level of funding for small builders across rural Scotland.

Newly built properties will always be only part of the equation. There are currently an estimated 27,000 empty properties around Scotland. We need to make every effort to bring these back into use. There are already a number of grant and loan schemes, each with different eligibility criteria and little advertising. We should build on the success of the Help to Buy brand and introduce a Help to Rebuild programme which would both improve public awareness of available funding and rationalise and simplify the present arrangements, with budgets increased by £30m over the course of the Parliament.

Making it Easier to Buy a Home

The devolution of stamp duty to the Scottish Parliament gives it the opportunity to tailor a tax to Scottish circumstances and there are elements of the Scottish Government's Land and Buildings Transaction Tax that we have welcomed - the abolition of the slab structure and the raising of the 0% threshold. However, from the outset we have been raising concerns over the impact of the new rates on the middle and upper sections of the housing market. Significant pressure on the SNP achieved the introduction of a 5% band, but this does not go far enough. Latest statistics suggest that the slowdown in sections of the housing market will result in tax receipts falling short by around £40m. We therefore remain committed to expanding the top threshold for the 5% band to £500,000.

We have supported the introduction of the LBTT additional dwelling supplement on second homes, but continue to have concerns regarding the unintended consequences on those in the process of moving house and in temporary ownership of two properties. We have proposed a grace period for these "accidental second home owners" of 60 days, which was voted down by the SNP. We will continue to press the government on this. In addition, we believe the supplement should be waived for investors who are in return willing to enter rent-lock schemes and provide these properties at affordable rents for a set period of time.

The success of the Help to Buy scheme - both its UK and Scottish versions - has allowed thousand of Scots to enter the housing ladder for the first time. We would ensure the equity loan scheme continues until the end of the Parliament with appropriate funding. This operates in addition to the UK-wide Help to Buy mortgage guarantee and the more recent Help to Buy ISA helping families save for their deposits.

People who aspire to home ownership, no matter their background, should be offered help as and when their circumstances change. Buying their own home outright is still beyond the reach of many social tenants and others simply do not want to leave the place they have called home for years. We would therefore

reintroduce the Right to Buy in Scotland and ringfence all funds raised from the policies for future social house-building.

Secure, Clean and Affordable Energy

We have for long argued that Scottish energy generation should be based on three key principles - security of supply, affordability and decarbonisation. This requires a mixed energy policy, without an overt reliance on one type of generation and with ongoing support for sunrise technologies. Scottish Conservatives are the only party that believes our existing nuclear capacity should be protected for the long-term and we should explore options of how this can be achieved realistically and affordably.

We won't participate in the present political posturing over unconventional gas by our opponents, especially in light of recent developments at Grangemouth, which was only saved through shale gas imports from the United States. Scotland has decades of experience in offshore drilling and hydraulic fracturing, with the best environmental safety regime in the world. With thousands of job losses across the North East, we should utilise this expertise to safely extract unconventional gas, with planning consent from local communities.

We also believe that we need to find ways to incentivise the expansion of our energy storage capacity. With Scotland's electricity generation increasingly relying on intermittent sources of energy, expanding energy storage solutions is a necessity. We will therefore work with both the Scottish and UK Governments to develop further support mechanisms for energy storage. This should go alongside a review of planning system provisions for repowering existing onshore wind farms coming to the end of their lifetimes.

Renewable electricity generation, however, will only take us so far in trying to reduce our emissions. Reducing electricity demand, especially non-domestic demand, has to be a part of the solution. Furthermore, with heating accounting for almost half of all our emissions in Scotland, we need to focus heavily on expanding district heating across the country. The potential is highest in urban areas, but schemes can develop across rural communities too, for example by incorporating smaller biomass fuel systems utilising waste from agricultural activity.

Public sector leadership and investment is crucial in this area, but there are further steps that can be taken. Local development plans should for example be required to consider the viability of district heating schemes and explain why if they decide not to include them. As infrastructure develops, further regulatory intervention may be necessary to ensure take up. Furthermore, concerns have been raised over the recent changes to Renewable Energy Generation Relief, which have the potential to reduce the financial viability of many existing district heating schemes.

Warmer Homes - Healthier Lives

Research clearly shows that living in cold damp homes results in a much higher likelihood of mental health problems, a higher incidence of respiratory disease and other physical health issues. Scotland's existing housing stock is still lagging behind desired energy efficiency standards, with around 65% of Scotland's properties rated

EPC D or worse - the figure rising to 80% in rural Scotland. This has a direct impact on fuel poverty rates, with 35% households in Scotland living in fuel poverty and the equivalent figure being 50% in rural Scotland. This is simply unacceptable. While the determinants of fuel poverty are varied and not always under the control of government - UK or Scottish - investing in energy efficiency measures is a direct way to reduce carbon emissions as well as households' heating bills. Scottish Conservatives therefore believe that we should introduce a clear target to achieve a transformative change in energy efficiency across Scotland - with all properties achieving an EPC C rating or above by the end of the next decade at the latest.

We welcome the designation of energy efficiency as a National Infrastructure Priority, but were disappointed to see no clear policy detail or funding commitment from the Scottish Government. In order to achieve the transformational change we envisage, we need to commit significant levels of capital investment to the project. We would like to see the energy efficiency budget line gradually reach 10% of the Scottish Government's capital budget allocations. This means capital infrastructure investment rising from this year's £80m (under 3% of the budget) to £340m by 2020/21 - a cumulative £1 billion over the next 5 years.

An infrastructure project of this magnitude has to be supplemented by loans as well as other relief measures. While in the past much of the focus was on easy to reach homes, we believe a energy efficiency data collection needs improvement and focus shifted on the hardest to reach homes first and those on the lowest incomes, where the individual household benefits will be the highest. Such an approach could also create thousands of jobs across all areas of Scotland, in contrast with usual large-scale infrastructure projects. In addition to grants and loans, we need to ensure that energy efficiency improvements are reflected in relief schemes, either through council tax/LBTT discounts or the business rates system, which today actually disincentivises improvements.

We believe that Winter Fuel Payments and Cold Weather Payments should be protected when they are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, although changes to when in the year the former are paid do merit consideration.

5. A strong economy for your job and business

Top priorities

- Freezing business rates and conducting a thorough review
- Developing skills that align with business demand
- Supporting rural businesses across Scotland

Why we need a strong opposition

Scotland's businesses have been shouldering an increasing burden of taxation over the last few years, with non-domestic rate income rising from around £1.8bn before the SNP took power to a projected £2.8bn this financial year. Business rate income accounts for an increasing percentage share of council funding too, with central grants falling. The poundage rate itself has increased by 19% since 2010. Recent

changes south of the Border also mean the business rate regime in Scotland has become less competitive, with the large business supplement payable at a higher rate and lower threshold. In addition, the SNP's plans for income tax will make Scotland the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom.

In our rural areas, the SNP's CAP payment fiasco will go down in history as one of the worst examples of mismanagement by a Scottish government. The SNP's new computer system to administer CAP applications and payment still doesn't work and the SNP have known for over a year that it didn't work, but have repeatedly refused to admit continued failings. The entire programme was expected to cost £88m but is now forecast to total approximately £180m. While the government can ill afford wasting such sums of money, the hardship this brought on our farmers and the damage to our wider rural economy is unforgivable.

Competitive and Fair Taxation for Scotland

Our taxation regime has to achieve both objectives of fairness and competitiveness. It is fair to ask those who can afford to to pay a little more, but this should not jeopardise our competitiveness and - consequently - our attractiveness as a place to live and work. Personal and business taxes therefore have to be balanced to stimulate investment and employment and raise sufficient revenue to fund our public services. Scottish Conservatives will take such a balanced approach into the next Parliament. Building on the final report of our Independent Commission for Competitive and Fair Taxation, we believe income tax rates should not rise above those in the rest of the UK, LBTT should be adjusted to reinvigorate the housing market and council tax reformed into a more local and fairer tax.

On our main business tax, we are pleased that the government is taking forward a rates review and we will ensure this is done thoroughly and explores several alternative options for reform in cooperation with our business community. All major business organisations - led by the retail sector - have called for reform and it is clear we need to act to put in place a more responsive, simpler and more flexible system. Regardless of the outcome of the review, however, Scottish Conservatives believe that the burden of business rates should not keep increasing and we would therefore freeze business rates until the recommendations of the review are put fully in place. That means ensuring a revenue neutral revaluation in 2017 and a frozen poundage rate thereafter, with any increases in revenue only as a result of increased buoyancy. In addition, we remain committed to doubling the Business Rates Incentivisation Scheme so that local authorities are allowed to keep all 100% of additional revenue raised beyond their annual buoyancy targets.

We have studied the evidence on Air Passenger Duty, alongside the final report of our Tax Commission, and have concluded that we will not support the Scottish Government's proposed 50% cut in APD. Presently, there is a lack of independent evidence that would support the government's assertions that APD at current levels inhibits personal and business travel. We do believe reform should be pursued, however, with a change into a more progressive tax that is destination-linked to travel within particular geographic blocks. This would mean differing APD rates for flights within the UK, EU, EEA and others beyond, with broadly increasing rates by distance. Furthermore, we would continue to ensure under 16s don't pay APD.

Business Support and Regulation

Taxation will always be only one side of the coin for the business community. Consistency in the application of regulation, planning and licensing laws is just as important and approaches like the Primary Authority should be built upon. We welcomed the establishment of the mygov.scot portal and would support a gradual incorporation or other business support services on the same portal - for example the Business Gateway, Scottish Enterprise or Skills Development Scotland websites. Over time, we should also endeavour for business rates to be payable through the portal.

Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise provide an important service to our businesses across Scotland. Nonetheless, the recognition of the Highlands and Islands as a unique business landscape requiring unique support, leads us to believe that this approach could be replicated elsewhere too. In particular, we believe a South of Scotland Enterprise should be considered. This should have a social as well as an economic remit - which is the key difference between SE and HIE today.

Business support has to be tailored to different kinds of enterprises as well as different enterprise sizes. We have long supported social enterprises, which are some of the best examples of how entrepreneurship can deliver improved social and community outcomes - housing associations and credit unions being for example being an integral part of Scotland's communities. We will look to support social enterprises through increased awareness and publicity, through a new apprenticeship framework and helping incorporation into local supply chains. Procurement policy should generally aim to increase participation of SMEs and encourage locally sourced materials to be used.

Boosting Skills and Productivity

While the factors influencing productivity growth are varied and sometimes contested, the relationship between productivity growth and higher wages is clear. Increasing our productivity - which significantly lags behind some of our OECD competitors - should therefore be the clear aim of any future government. Developing a modern digital infrastructure and aligning skills development with business demand are two areas where progress is needed most in Scotland.

The UK Government's announcement on a Universal Service Obligation for broadband is a very welcome one. We first called for this in our Rural Commission report and are pleased to see it taken forward. A USO will mean every home and business in Scotland being connected to fast broadband by the end of the decade. In the meantime, there are steps we can take in Scotland too - we have long supported a recalibration and more funding for Community Broadband Scotland. An additional £5m every year and an extension of eligibility criteria to businesses, charities and individuals in addition to communities could make a significant difference to those who rely on innovative delivery solutions.

Scottish Conservatives have consistently made the case for more vocational education and skills training to be aligned with business demand. Per head of

population, Scotland has only half the number of apprenticeships as England and we believe this must change. We want to see an additional 10,000 apprenticeship starts every year by the end of the Parliament - twice the current SNP proposals - in particular expanding opportunities for women as well as higher level apprenticeships. Smaller, bite-sized training opportunities should also be developed by, for example, supporting internship schemes by part-funding them for their duration. In addition, we would want to work with businesses to develop at least an additional 10 skills academies across Scotland in the next Parliament.

Viable Rural Businesses at Heart of Sustainable Rural Communities

Standing up for Scottish Farmers

The SNP's CAP payment fiasco will go down in history as one of the worst examples of mismanagement by a Scottish government. The new IT system to process CAP payments has already overrun in cost by £100m. What is worse is it still does not work and the Scottish Government had to find an additional £200m from its Budget while farmers wait for European funds. While the government can ill afford wasting such sums of money, the hardship this brought on our farmers and the damage to our wider rural economy is unforgivable.

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 fight to the SNP in Holyrood. In the next Parliament we will continue to 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.

We want more land in Scotland to be farmed and to be farmed well - the advantages of home grown produce go far beyond just economic examples. To that end, we need to support a healthy and vibrant tenancy sector ready for the future. CAP reform is likely to continue and we will always stand by farmers during any reform programme. Our UK colleagues have reaffirmed their commitment to review CAP allocations and we will hold them to this, fighting for a good deal for Scotland. We should also always make policy decision with sound science at heart - something that was suspended in the government's decision on GM crops.

We will continue to reject an Absolute Right to Buy, the very consideration of which is preventing new land being made available for tenancies. We will also change '91 tenancy assignation provisions to a conversion model which would allow secure tenants convert into at least 25-year Limited Duration Tenancies and then assign for value. In addition to this, we should introduce planning system exemptions to allow retiring farmers or new entrants to build a home on agricultural land. In the longer term, we should explore whether a new form of tenancy should be introduced, allowing landlords and tenants come to regular business agreements within some important legislative constraints protecting both parties.

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.

Community buyouts are not the only form of land use – sometimes long leases are preferable to communities as well as landowners. Scottish Conservatives would therefore support opening the Scottish Land Fund to long lease funding for communities. We would also explore reintroducing business rate relief to sporting estates which manage their environment and wildlife to a high standard.

Our forestry sector is also set to undergo changes with the full devolution of the Forestry Commission to Scotland. We need to ensure that this process does not result in a loss of expertise and inhibit any cross-border joint working. The convoluted forestry grant application process also needs addressing as it is clearly having an impact on the government's laudable tree planting target.

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.

Marine Protected Areas 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 on the social and economic fabric of often isolated communities. We would want to conduct a review of the way they MPAs were decided on and implement them in a fairer, more balanced and scientifically proven way.

Reform of wild fisheries is on the agenda early in the next Parliament and Scottish Conservatives will continue to advocate a local, river-based management structure. We also support a safe expansion of aquaculture, but with a significantly more robust, open data, site-level reporting of sea lice levels.

6. A safe environment for your neighbourhood

Top priorities

- Making Police Scotland accountable to local communities again
- Taking action on anti-social behaviour and community sentences
- Focusing justice policy on cutting reoffending

Why we need a strong opposition

The introduction of a centralised police service in Scotland is a significant failure of this Scottish Government, with local communities having lost their links to what used to be a local service. Despite pushing the SNP into taking action on automatic early release, Scottish Government reforms apply to only 3% of all prisoners, with the remainder still eligible to be released at the halfway point of their sentence. Reconviction rates have remained relatively static throughout devolution, with the estimated economic and social cost of reoffending at around £3 billion. This is directly linked to the very low levels of purposeful activity within prisons, highlighted in successive prison reports. Our new community sentences - CPOs - were promised to be firm, but latest statistics show that one in five of those issued don't include any unpaid work at all.

A Locally Accountable Police Service

It has become increasingly clear that the centralisation of our police service has not worked in the manner it was hoped. Scottish Conservatives voiced concerns about the loss of local accountability from the beginning of the process. Subsequent revelations surrounding armed police and excessive use of stop and search have made it quite clear that these concerns were justified. We believe a thorough review of the arrangements in place must be conducted as soon as possible and this should include looking at ways in which local accountability can be restored.

While we have supported the devolution of the functions of the British Transport Police, agreed as part of the Smith Commission, we have serious concerns over the planned incorporation into Police Scotland. We will oppose these proposals and instead argue for improved scrutiny and accountability arrangements in the Scottish Parliament, alongside a closer alignment of BTP policy to Scottish policing priorities.

Tackling Crime in our Communities

Community sentences have an important role to play in our justice system, but they need to be credible alternatives to prison. Latest statistics suggest that one in five Community Payback Orders do not include any unpaid work at all. We believe a presumption should be introduced into CPO legislation, where the courts would have to justify not imposing a work element. We will also look to introduce "swift and certain" schemes which where those breaching community sentences are sent to prison for 24 or 48 hours. In countries where this policy has been implemented the

evidence on falling reoffending has been remarkable. Other alternatives to prison should also be expanded in Scotland - we would pursue greater use of satellite tracking and strict home detention.

However, for some of the worst offenders out there the punishment should be straightforward – life should mean life. For some of the worst crimes committed, prisoners should not have the right to apply for parole. This would require small legislative change, but would send a big signal that our justice system will bear down on the worst of crimes with the strongest possible measure.

Anti-social behaviour remains one of the biggest concerns across our local communities. While it was the Scottish Conservatives who pushed the SNP into hiring additional police officers, we have to allow them to get on with the job instead of filling back office vacancies. We also need to equip them with the appropriate tools to perform their duties. We will push for the introduction of two levels of anti-social behaviour Fixed Penalty Notices, with a higher penalty for more serious instances.

Prisons that Work

Breaking the cycle of reoffending has to be the focus of justice policy, with rates still unacceptably high. The lack of any meaningful activity within prisons has been consistently highlighted by a series of inspectorate reports. There is no point in prisons which simply house criminals, without any attempt at rehabilitation. We think that skills development and employment must be at the centre of our prisons policy. In the first instance, we should conduct a thorough review of rehabilitation schemes across the prison estate, before setting up workshops and other educational opportunities within prison walls, in cooperation with the private and voluntary sectors.

The third sector has a particular role to play in this process and we need to develop schemes which see innovative charities work with offenders before, during and after their prison term to help with their rehabilitative journey. This could be done through the introduction of payment-by-results schemes, which would offer increasing payments to voluntary sector partners who succeed in curbing reoffending for their individual clients.

We have long campaigned for the scrapping of automatic early release. The changes brought in by the SNP affect only 3% of prisoners (those on long sentences), but we believe the presumption for all sentences is that they should be served in full, with additional discretion for the Parole Board. The time offenders spend behind bars should be decided by judges and not politicians. Ending automatic early release would mean offenders serving the sentence handed out and spending more time in rehabilitation.

Drug rehabilitation should also be based on abstinence, with regular drugs testing in place across prisons. More broadly, we have always preferred smaller, abstinence-based, local programmes rather than a blanket approach of substituting illegal drugs with methadone, without any meaningful progress in treatment.

Law Reform

The evidence from the Law Society of Scotland and others on several areas of law reform is compelling. As the Parliament matures, there is a need for continuous review of legislation passed over past sessions. We agree that Scottish Law Commission reports should be taken forward at the earliest opportunity. Their present work on defamation is of particular interest and we will work with the Scottish Government in line with the SLC's recommendations. Other areas that we believe require review are Family Law as well as the Gender Recognition Act.

Access to justice is one of the most important tenets of a civilised society. Our legal aid system fulfils a crucial duty, but its complexity and funding pressures often result in some of the most vulnerable citizens missing out on assistance. We agree legal aid provisions need simplified, reviewed and supported by sufficient levels of funding. We will continue to support extending legal aid to rape victims to allow them access advice when opposing legal teams try to access their medical records.

7. A sustainable future for your community

Top priorities

- Delivering fast and reliable broadband for all
- Revitalising our town centres
- Supporting communities with infrastructure investment

Why we need a strong opposition

Across Scotland our high streets and town centres are still in decline, with little sign of resurgence after the recession. The sight of empty shops across our town centres, with shoppers avoiding them in favour of retail parks, is all too common. The broadband rollout programme has been painfully slow, with thousands of homes and businesses, especially in rural areas, without any access whatsoever. The voices of local communities in planning decisions are being regularly overturned, with the most recent decision to remove community planning powers over larger housing developments the latest example of SNP centralisation.

The Most Beautiful Country in the World

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 arts and cultural heritage is renowned the world over and we should continue to showcase it through free access to museums and galleries. 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 & Unionist Party supports the creation of further national parks across Scotland. They would not only help protect some of our greatest landscapes, 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, invest in transport links as well as affordable housing.

Improving Digital Connectivity

To connect rural Scotland, we need to prioritise and accelerate rural superfast broadband rollout. Reliable broadband access is vital for rural Scotland – for families, businesses and the third sector. 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, expanding 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.

Revitalising Town Centres

The reasons for our empty town centres are varied and often depend on local policies in regulation and parking fees. There are steps, however, that central governments can take - in cooperation with local authorities - to unlock investment, revitalise town centres and attract more footfall. A consistent and thorough application of the Town Centre First approach should be at heart of such an approach. Further support should be given to projects that bring empty properties back into use - often converting empty business properties into affordable housing. The first two tranches of the Town Centre Regeneration Fund were immensely successful in regenerating areas all around Scotland. We have consistently argued for a new round of this fund to be put in place and would like to see £30m committed by the Scottish Government to this annually.

In addition to this, however, we believe that we should extend the present Enterprise Area approach to a more local scheme and create a network of Regeneration Zones. These zones would be set up in cooperation with local government and could provide incentives including business rates relief, LBTT relief, fast tracked planning applications, the prioritisation of high speed broadband, specific skills and training support and business advice and support. Regeneration Zones would differ from Enterprise Areas already in place elsewhere in Scotland because they would apply to any businesses willing to invest in a specific geographical location, rather than to specific sectors.

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. If a major development application decision is taken in line with the Strategic and Local Development Plan the appeal should be decided in a full council meeting, as opposed to being referred to Scottish Ministers. This has to go hand in hand with a better consultation process during the drawing up of Strategic and Local Development Plans.

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.

Devolving power to local communities and groups should not be constrained to ownership alone, which has been the Scottish Government's primary focus. We believe a Community Right to Challenge should be introduced in Scotland too. This would give community and voluntary bodies the right to express interest in taking over a specific council-run service. The local authority in question would be required to respond to this challenge and unless there are reasonable grounds for refusal the council would have to run a procurement exercise where the services would be opened up to bids.

Providing More Affordable Rural Homes

Never has it 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.

Improving Transport Links

Investing in our road network is vital, and especially so for the rural communities around Scotland. We therefore think the government should maintain the share of the budget that goes to road investment. The A82 in Argyll and the Highlands, the A75 in the South West (bypassing Springholm and Crocketford), the A1 in the Borders, 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. Promoting the use of electric vehicles, for example by expanding the number of charging points at transport hubs across Scotland, should also be an objective for the next government.

Buses are a lifeline for rural communities and we think the Scottish Government should increase support for community schemes by extending the free bus pass scheme to community transport. This should also include capital support for ticketing machine installation. 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 is patchy and inconsistent at best, with a comprehensive national strategy absent - this needs to change.

Rail investment in Scotland is lagging behind the rest of the UK. 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.

Investing in active travel and supporting walking and cycling brings multiple benefits - health as well as environmental ones. It is the most affordable and accessible form of travel, with clear impacts on our quality of life. The Scottish Government should work with local authorities and third sector partners on improving our walking and cycle path network. We will press the government for an additional £5m to be invested in the Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets local authority capital grant, which is the most direct way of supporting active travel infrastructure. As an overarching aim, we should work towards providing at least one segregated cycle route in each of Scotland's seven cities, linking from outer city limits through city centres.

A Scottish Parliament that works for you

Using our tax powers to create a competitive and fair Scotland
Supporting the most vulnerable with Scottish welfare powers
Ensuring our two governments work together

A better start in life for your children

Extending flexible, high-quality childcare
Empowering our school leaders
Focusing on vocational education and reversing college cuts

A world-class health care system for your loved ones

Protecting NHS funding with a health guarantee
Boosting mental health investment
Putting patients in charge

A warm home for your family

Building 100,000 new homes over the next Parliament
Investing in secure, clean and affordable energy
Ensuring no-one lives in a hard to heat home

A strong economy for your job and business

Freezing business rates and conducting a thorough review
Developing skills that align with business demand
Supporting rural businesses across Scotland

A safe environment for your neighbourhood

Making Police Scotland accountable to local communities again
Taking action on anti-social behaviour and community sentences
Focusing justice policy on cutting reoffending

A sustainable future for your community

Delivering fast and reliable broadband for all
Revitalising our town centres
Supporting communities with infrastructure investment