

# Rural Manifesto

## Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party

April 2021



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# Foreword

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Scotland's rural communities have been neglected by the SNP for too long. They have been held back by poor infrastructure, diminished services and a lack of clarity for farmers - this must change now.

Rural areas must not be left behind as Scotland recovers from COVID-19, so we have set out plans to spread economic growth and improve public services. We want to create jobs in these areas, so that no one needs to move away from where they have grown up to find work. From rolling out full fibre broadband to ensuring councils receive fair funding, the Scottish Conservatives will give rural areas the support they need to thrive.

We would also take action to tackle rural crime and support the fishing and farming communities who are the bedrock of our rural areas. These custodians of our land play a huge role in protecting Scotland's diverse natural environments, and we would support this work with a new Nature Bill.

This preservation is vital as our rural areas attract visitors to Scotland, which is key to our economic recovery but can also create problems. We will work with farmers and communities to encourage responsible tourism and ensure everyone who visits the countryside leaves it as they found it.

I am committed to putting a stop to the SNP's centralisation agenda. Scottish Conservatives will represent rural communities, so your voices are heard and your needs are met. Supporting every part of Scotland to recover from the impact of COVID-19 should be the next Scottish Parliament's top priority, but the SNP are distracted by pushing for a second independence referendum.

The only way to stop an SNP majority again - and get the Scottish Parliament 100% focused on rebuilding Scotland - is to vote Scottish Conservative & Unionist with your constituency and party list ballot in May.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Douglas Ross'. The signature is stylized and cursive.

**Douglas Ross**  
Leader of the Scottish Conservative and  
Unionist Party

# Supporting the rural economy

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- **Supporting local job creation in our towns and villages through Community Investment Deals.** Local businesses have closed and communities have been left behind by the SNP. We will focus on rebuilding our communities by investing £550 million in Community Investment Deals worth up to £25 million each.
- **Restoring our rural town centres and high streets.** We would fund the scrapping of parking charges, give communities first 'right to buy' when local businesses are closing and put in place incentives for the re-development of long-term unoccupied business properties into housing. We would support councils to exempt high streets and town centre businesses from paying rates to make them more competitive with online and out of town retailers.
- **Protecting local planning decisions from being overturned.** The SNP are exerting a colossal power grab on councils by overturning hundreds of local planning decisions every year, including 4 in 10 in 2019-20, and allowing developments to go ahead despite community objections. We would legislate to prevent the Scottish Government using the appeals process or call-in powers to overturn local decisions, and instead focus on ensuring that national developments always benefit local neighbourhoods.
- **Establishing regional economic development agencies for every part of Scotland to promote growth and good jobs everywhere.** Building on the work of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise, we would establish an enterprise agency for every region.
- **Promoting Scotland as a tourist destination.** We would launch a new campaign to attract domestic tourism this year, while working to promote responsible tourism. We will continue to oppose 'one size fits all' short-term lets legislation and the introduction of a tourist tax.
- **Supporting coastal communities to thrive.** We will support freeport bids from across Scotland, implement measures to support other ports to grow and prioritise coastal communities for Community Investment Deal funding.

# Improving the rural housing market

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- **We will improve and increase the Rural Housing Fund and extend it throughout the next Parliament.** The Scottish Conservatives originally called for the introduction of this Fund through our Rural Commission but as of summer last year the SNP had built just 59 homes through despite investing £25 million. We will continue the Fund, invest £50 million throughout the next Parliament and manage it properly so that it supports housebuilding and renovation in rural areas.
- **Including an obligation on councils to deliver services with housing in our Communities Bill.** We cannot just build housing - we need to build communities. Particularly in rural areas, we need to deliver proper town planning and the services that people will use, so that new housing is not a burden on those people who already live in an area. This includes shops, parks, public pathways, roads and schools. We will place new obligations on councils and developers for large scale new housing developments to deliver services in addition to housing.
- **Introducing compulsory sale orders to end the blight of long-term unoccupied properties across Scotland and bring those properties back into use.** This would allow councils to sell long-term unoccupied properties in communities which have become derelict and run-down. Last year there were over 47,000 long-term empty properties and the problem is worst in rural areas.

# Delivering high-quality services in rural areas

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- **Enshrining fair funding for councils into law, ensuring that rural local authorities receive the resources they need.** The SNP have grabbed cash from our local authorities for years as they imposed their centralisation agenda. We will focus on rebuilding our communities from this pandemic by ensuring councils receive a set fraction of the Scottish Government budget each year.
- **Ensuring every home and business premise in Scotland has a full fibre connection by the end of 2027.** To help do this we would legislate so that every new home must be built with full fibre broadband. The SNP's rollout of digital infrastructure has been marked by dither and delay. We will focus on rebuilding our rural communities from this pandemic by ensuring people can work and do business remotely with a great internet connection.
- **Reviewing the Beeching railway lines, with a view to reopening connections and stations that will support local growth.** Good transport links are essential for helping rural communities thrive and grow, but the SNP have let these areas down. We will focus on rebuilding our communities by restoring Scotland's railways.
- **Upgrading and building new infrastructure across the North East.** We will upgrade key roads by dualling the A96 between Aberdeen and Inverness and improving the A90 at Laurencekirk and Ellon. We will review the reopening of local railways and stations if they will drive local growth, like the Formartine and Buchan Railway and Brechin and Newtonhill stations.
- **Preventing geographic discrimination resulting in those living in rural areas across Scotland paying higher delivery charges.** We have long campaigned against households and businesses in remote and rural parts of Scotland having to pay higher delivery charges. We would work with the UK Government to make it illegal to charge higher costs when posting to remote and rural parts of Scotland.
- **Launching a Rural Teacher Fund as part of our £550 million teacher workforce strategy.** We would introduce effective financial incentives for teachers who take up posts in rural areas with the most need – encouraging people to move to teach in these areas while also encouraging local people to join the profession – as well as a bespoke package of early career support for teachers in rural areas and meaningful development and progression structures.
- **Introducing a Local Health Guarantee to restore a presumption against centralisation and protect rural hospitals and health services.** Local services have been degraded by the SNP, who have broken promises and let down local communities. We would introduce a Local Healthcare Guarantee and take immediate action to reinstate consultant-led maternity services at Dr Gray's Hospital in Elgin as well as re-opening the Mulberry Unit at Stracathro and minor injury units at Banff and Inch.
- **Backing our police with a new Local Policing Act.** The SNP have decimated local policing and violent crime is on the rise. We would put bobbies back on the beat and give rural communities more input into police decision making.



# Supporting farmers

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- **Ending uncertainty for farmers by launching a full public consultation on a blueprint for Scotland's new agricultural policy within 100 days of the election.** The SNP have dallied and delayed for too long. We would work with the sector to develop a scheme which allows farmers to farm, prioritises simplicity and supports Scotland's diverse farms and crofts.
- **Reinstating support for new entrants into farming.** We would reopen the Young Farmers and New Entrants Start Up Grants as well as the New Entrants Capital Grant Scheme and support inter-generational partnerships via mentoring schemes, with a focus on supporting women in the sector. We would also support succession planning and ensure farm tenancies work for tenants and landowners.
- **Investing in research and development and farm diversification.** We would invest an additional £10 million a year in agricultural research and work with the UK Government to ensure the Shared Prosperity Fund includes schemes which promote farm diversification.
- **Cracking down on rural crime.** We would review sentences and penalties to ensure rural crime is treated with the magnitude it deserves, as well as improving reporting and working with the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime to spread best practice within Police Scotland. We would increase fixed penalties and maximum fines for litter and fly-tipping and use the increased income to resource council enforcement measures, as well as introducing regular reporting and ensuring that local authorities and other agencies can effectively prosecute offenders.
- **Boosting demand for Scottish produce.** We would commission a comprehensive and independent 'farm to fork' review of Scotland's food policy to inform a new National Food Strategy. It would consider ways to strengthen producers' bargaining power, support them to upscale and export, better label Scottish produce, ensure public procurement utilises Scottish produce wherever possible, promote Scottish produce at home and abroad, including in our schools, reduce food waste and boost food and agri-tourism.

# Protecting the environment

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- **Passing a new Nature Bill to protect Scotland's natural environment.** The Bill will aim to reduce the threat of species extinction, expand green spaces in towns and cities and protecting marine life. It will also tackle invasive non-native species, increase tree planting, end peat extraction for use in compost, create a third national park and review Marine Protected Areas with a view to expansion.
- **Promoting responsible tourism.** With more people spending time outdoors, we must encourage them to enjoy Scotland's countryside responsibly. We would expand Visit Scotland's current responsible tourism campaign to provide farmers with resources explaining the Scottish Outdoor Access Code to use on their land and provide packs to schools to teach children about how to protect the countryside. We would also commit to expanding ranger services permanently by delivering the actions set out in NatureScot's policy statement and ensuring they have the funding they need.
- **Set aside a Rural Transition Fund to prioritise those off-grid areas to be the first to transition to low carbon heating.** As part of our £2.5 billion investment in energy efficiency and low carbon heating we will set up a specific fund to support the transition of homes and business premises heated by off-grid systems. We believe that there is an opportunity to make these buildings the first to transition towards low carbon heating systems.



