



Standing up

for Rural Scotland

**The Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
Manifesto for Rural Scotland 2026**

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Foreword

Rural Scotland plays a vital role in our economy, food security, culture, and heritage.

It is the home of our farmers, our fishermen, our gamekeepers, our rural businesses owners, and many more who work incredibly hard to manage and protect Scotland's diverse landscape.

Scottish Government figures show that rural Scotland accounts for 98% of our landmass. Their most recent agricultural census found that nearly two thirds of Scotland's total land area is used for agricultural purposes, and Scotland's fishermen land over half of the UK's annual fishing catch.

Yet despite the vast size and importance of Scotland's rural landscape and industries, the SNP have completely neglected rural Scotland throughout their 19 years in government, instead only coming up with new ways to attack rural ways of life.

Labour are no better. Their cruel family farm tax is perhaps the biggest single blow that has been dealt to rural communities in a generation – and unless this punishing tax is fully reversed, it will cause untold harm to our agriculture sector for years to come. Just like with the SNP, rural Britain is an afterthought to Sir Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves. They are constantly making life more difficult for rural and coastal communities who just want a government that's on their side.

The Scottish Conservatives believe that dedicated policies must be devised to meet the unique needs of our agricultural and fishing sectors, and rural and remote communities – but a rural policy offering cannot be developed in isolation. Rural communities are impacted by all policy areas – from health, to policing, to economy – and their needs must be central to every law passed by Holyrood.

This means developing economic policies that support rural businesses, ensuring the NHS caters for those in remote areas and guaranteeing that housing plans deliver the right infrastructure in the right place for rural communities.

Unlike Scotland's current SNP and Labour governments, the Scottish Conservatives are listening – to our farmers, our fishermen, our land managers and our rural and coastal communities.

The policies that follow look to support, improve, and protect rural Scotland. In doing so we will show that the **Scottish Conservatives remain the only party standing up for rural and coastal Scotland.**

Boosting the rural economy

Rural Scotland accounts for 98% of the country's landmass, but it faces significant challenges from the threat of depopulation.

Recent statistics show one in five rural residents, particularly those of working age, report that they are likely to move to an urban area. Rural depopulation has become one of the most significant and long-term issues facing rural Scotland, yet for 20 years the SNP Government has failed to do enough to prevent and tackle this.

The Scottish Conservatives therefore propose a number of policies to boost the rural economy, support those who live and work there and reverse the trend of depopulation.

Establish Scottish Business Zones in rural areas to attract jobs and investment. These zones would give Ministers powers to bring investment and economic growth to declining parts of Scotland, including in rural areas where we

will retain strong protections for our natural environment.

Establish a Rural Regeneration Relief scheme. This scheme would give businesses in rural parts of Scotland with low economic activity business rates discounts funded by the Scottish Government. This would help already established businesses continue their operations and attract new investment. Our plan would allow the Scottish Government and local authorities to consider all areas outside our major towns and cities that are in need of regeneration for the relief.

Create a dedicated rural division of Growth Scotland. Our new economic body, Growth Scotland, would have a dedicated rural division that could make use of the large pool of capital to help support rural businesses. In particular, it would be able to help emerging rural businesses innovate in areas such as vertical farming and encourage the start-up of services that are lacking in rural areas, such as rural veterinary practices. We

would also provide a dedicated service for farmers and fishermen to assist with capital projects. We would retain distinct bodies for rural Scotland (the South of Scotland Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise) but would ensure that the rural arm of Growth Scotland works in collaboration with these bodies to allow for the best support to be provided to rural Scotland.

Enhance Permitted Development Rights. We would expand permitted development rights to allow farmers to bring farm or estate buildings back into use for housing and support farm diversification to boost agri-tourism.

Establish 're-population zones'. These would repopulate parts of rural Scotland that are seeing the population decline. Each zone would receive a budget which authorities could spend as needed for the purpose of attracting more people to live there. However, within that budget, we would ensure part of that is kept for grant funding for under 35s to live, work,

or return to the areas they grew up in. This funding would deliver relocation grants and provide training for local jobs.

Repeal SNP legislation which makes buying and selling land in rural Scotland harder. Recently passed land reform legislation could force large landholdings to be sold in lots, ignoring the fact that sometimes rural businesses have to operate at scale to survive. We would repeal this legislation and commit to reviewing and repealing further damaging SNP laws.

Establish a Key Workers Support Scheme. Revamp the existing £25 million scheme to make it more effective and focused on allowing local authorities to purchase housing to rent for key workers moving into the area. In addition, we would provide funding to allow owners to repair unoccupied homes for the purpose of supplying them to key workers.

Improve digital connectivity across rural Scotland. We would ensure that living in rural Scotland does not mean you are disconnected. We would prioritise finishing the delayed rollout of the R100 programme to bring faster broadband access to Scotland and ensure it is completed by 2027-28. We would also take action to increase the rollout of 4G and 5G in rural Scotland.



Stand up for Scotland's food and drink sector. The Scottish Conservatives are consistent champions of local Scottish produce and have stood up for our food producers. We would review labelling laws in Scotland to ensure that produce promoted as Scottish is sourced from Scotland. We would also establish a 'new market support fund' to allow producers to explore new markets.

Promote the use of venison. This would be done by supporting producers, identifying issues in processing, supporting the marketing of venison, and facilitating the donation of venison to schools.

Reaffirm our commitment to field sports. We support sporting activities and recognise the value they add to the rural economy and the role they play in land management and conservation. In particular, we would reverse the SNP's decision to remove shoots and deer forests from the Small Business Bonus Scheme.

Upgrade key rural roads. The Scottish Conservatives would pass an emergency law to speed up the dualling of trunk roads like the A9. We would also upgrade the A74, A75, A83, A96 and other roads to ensure the roads people in rural Scotland rely on are not neglected.

Implement a new ferry procurement strategy. This would deliver the equivalent of three ferries every two years with an aim of reducing the average age of Scotland's ferry fleet from around a quarter of a century, down to 14 years. This would provide island communities with more reliable ferries, and tackle the constant delays and cancellations due to technical faults. We would also merge the Scottish Government-owned ferry owner and ferry operator CMAL and CalMac, to save taxpayers' money and deliver a more efficient service.

Create a Rural Bus Fund. Rural communities have suffered from declining bus services due to routes not being commercially viable and councils having to cut services, leaving certain areas without any access to bus services at all. We would establish a fund ensuring operators, especially in rural Scotland, can continue to run bus services on less profitable routes.

Revitalise Scotland's decaying bridges. Improving transport options for small towns and rural areas by establishing a National Bridge Restoration Fund. Too many of our bridges are dilapidated and no longer usable for transport purposes. Bridges are vital for cutting down journey times and connecting local communities.

By establishing a National Bridge Restoration Fund, this would allow local authorities to bid for financial backing to fix the bridges in their local area.

Support rural schools. Rural schools are amongst the worst hit when it comes to closures and they face more difficulty recruiting the teachers they need. We would explore options to allow communities in rural areas to take over their local school so they can remain open and teachers can be recruited.

Fight against rural bank closures. A lack of banks in rural areas has a negative impact on businesses, facilitates rural crime and leaves less digitally minded residents at a disadvantage. Whilst access to cash is controlled by UK legislation – the Scottish Conservatives will fight against new closures and support the further rollout of banking hubs in rural Scotland to plug financial gaps left behind by local banking closures.

Improving healthcare in rural areas

Many of the healthcare challenges facing Scotland are particularly acute in rural parts of the country.

Recently, Holyrood's Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee reported that the problem in accessing healthcare is a 'deep-rooted inequality' in rural Scotland. Like the rest of Scotland, rural areas face problems with waiting times and a lack of staff. But they also deal with problems in accessing local care across a wide range of health issues and there has been a persistent failure to address the unique challenges posed in rural areas with regards to mental health.

Our dedicated rural health policies target these problems and ensure that people have access to good healthcare wherever they live in Scotland.

Ensure that primary care works for patients and staff. We will help practices deliver appointments within 48 hours by providing additional funding and ensuring we

have enough trained doctors and advanced nurse practitioners. We will also work to keep open rural practices – recognising the benefit of local access to healthcare.

Increase the number of healthcare professionals in rural Scotland. We would ensure that there is enough housing for key workers such as nurses, doctors, and dentists to make working in rural Scotland attractive. We would work with local authorities and health boards so that enough housing is available to fulfil this ambition.

Make more use of mobile testing health equipment. Mobile testing units have already been used in parts of rural Scotland – with the ability to screen individuals for various diseases. We would seek to increase the use of these units to improve access to appointments.

Establish a 'health hut' fund. 'Health huts' have been previously trialled at auction marts in Scotland – addressing the barriers that specifically prevent farmers from accessing healthcare. These

pop-up surgeries allow anyone attending to access basic health checks, advice and referrals for further appointments. We would ensure the scheme receives the necessary funding to continue and extend its operation to fish markets and events for crofters.

Improve access to rural dental appointments. In some rural parts of Scotland, patients are waiting for years to access dental practices. Our plans to incentivise key workers to live in rural areas would bring more dentists to remote and rural areas and put an end to excessive waits for dentist appointments in rural communities.

Establish a dedicated rural mental health strategy. This would recognise that rural communities face very different mental health challenges from urban areas. We would establish a specific strategy in consultation with third sector organisations whilst ensuring that there are sufficient mental health practitioners working in rural areas and that walk-in mental health hubs are available across rural Scotland.

Improve women's access to healthcare. We would prevent the downgrading of any more rural maternity units and ensure those much-needed maternity units in Moray, Galloway, and Caithness are re-established. Our Women's Health Charter would also improve women's access to healthcare throughout our NHS, including in rural areas.

Ensure rural patients are digitally connected to the NHS. Our fast-tracked NHS App, which we would deliver by 2028, would ensure that people in rural parts have easy access to booking patient transport to take them to a GP or another health service. This would not replace other booking methods but complement them.

Give rural health boards fairer funding. We would create a Rural NHS Funding Formula for rural health boards. They face different challenges to their urban counterparts, often struggling to attract and retain staff, meaning patients often have to travel vast distances to see a specialist. This separate rural formula would account for the increased costs.



Backing Scotland's farmers

Scotland's two governments have given Scottish farmers a rough deal. Labour's disastrous Family Farm Tax and the SNP's longstanding neglect and disdain for farmers have only worsened the already challenging conditions farmers face.

The SNP have failed to give our farmers proper funding, have not done enough to encourage new farmers into the sector and continued to put climate goals ahead of protecting our good quality farmland and food security. Meanwhile, crofters are an afterthought with long awaited crofting legislation only tinkering around the edges of the historic laws that are in much need of an update to reflect modern crofting.

We believe it is time to properly back our farmers and crofters so that they can plan for the future, protect land meant for farming, back local produce over imports and guarantee our future food

security. In addition, we recognise the unique and very acute crime problems our rural communities face.

Reverse the Family Farm Tax.

The UK Conservative party will reverse the decision on the Family Farm Tax in full if we get back into government in 2029.

Boost funding for farmers with a £50 million uplift to the rural budget above inflation and guarantee multi-year settlements.

Funding for rural affairs was cut by the Scottish Government in its most recent budget. The Scottish Conservatives would uplift the budget by at least £50 million to reverse recent cuts and provide our agricultural sector with certainty by setting out multi-year funding settlements for the rural affairs budget.

Increase the funding available to farmers for equipment upgrades.

The capital budget for rural affairs provides money so that those in our agricultural industries are able to invest in newer equipment

that improves their productivity. We would uplift this budget to facilitate greater investment in new technology with the goal of reducing inputs and costs and supporting the environment.

Review the distribution and delivery of farm payments to ensure farmers get enough financial support to put food on our plates.

In particular, we would ensure that funding for active farming and crofting is prioritised. We will ensure that the majority of rural support is dedicated towards active farming and crofting. In addition, we would ensure that any unsuccessful applicants to funding schemes are given a clear reason as to why they were rejected.

Establish a New Entrant's Support Scheme.

Our Scheme would be designed to help new entrants into the agriculture and fishing sectors, by providing interest free loans for new entrants into agriculture and succession support for older farmers to allow new farmers access to land in a scheme that is the first of its kind in Scotland.



Cut red tape for our farmers so we free up their time to farm rather than fill forms. We would review all current agricultural paperwork requirements, condense it if possible and seek to reduce administrative financial burdens where possible.

Establish a Young Person's Agri-Enterprise Fund to support agri-tourism. This Fund would support young people already in farming to diversify their business. We would also extend permitted development rights to cover activities related to agri-tourism.

Make sure that tenancies can provide opportunities to new entrants. We would design farming tenancies to support new entrants entering the sector in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

Review existing agricultural and crofting legislation. We would review the SNP's legislation and policies in consultation with the sector with a view to consolidating useful pieces of legislation and repealing those that are harmful.

Oppose calls to reduce livestock numbers and meat eating. The SNP's 2045 net zero target would require a cull of sheep and cattle numbers as well as reducing the amount of meat we eat. The Scottish Conservatives unequivocally oppose these plans.

Approve the use of gene-editing. Following calls from the industry we would introduce legislation that would provide a legal framework for the introduction of precision breeding into Scotland.

Establish a Disease Welfare Action Fund. This Fund would enhance the public monitoring of emerging agricultural disease risks, increase laboratory capacity where needed and help to ensure the best possible animal welfare.

Ensure we have enough processors, abattoirs and livestock markets. We would seek to fill gaps in the processing market, ensure an increase in abattoir numbers and look into what support we could give to livestock markets to help farmers sell their produce.

Establish a National Flood Management Fund. This Fund would allow local community groups to access funding for local flood management in association with local authorities.

Work to increase the number of vets in the agricultural sector. There is a shortage of veterinary professionals in the agricultural sector and remote areas of Scotland. We would work with key stakeholders to increase the number of vets available in rural areas, bolstering support for

farmers to protect their livestock and remain productive and profitable.

Introduce a Bill to tackle rural crime at the beginning of the next Parliament. This law would ensure that equipment is fitted with an immobiliser and forensic markings to identify the buyer, require records to be kept including details on sale, and establish a new offence if efforts are made to sell equipment breaching these conditions.

Take further action to protect rural Scotland against crime. Our renewed approach to justice would crack down on rural crime by guaranteeing there are enough police officers to deal with these incidents. We would support the reform of Proceeds of Crime laws to see proceeds from rural crime be given back to rural communities. We would also ensure that rural crime bodies like the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime are adequately funded. Finally, we would improve the recording of crime by Police Scotland by ensuring that specific statistics on rural crime are included.

Standing up for fishing

The SNP Government have ignored fishing and our fishermen throughout the last session of the Scottish Parliament.

Scottish fishing supports an industry worth hundreds of millions of pounds and employs thousands of people. It also provides a healthy and nutritious food source and is important for our own food security. Unfortunately, the SNP and Labour have both failed the sector.

Instead of supporting our vital fishing industry, the SNP spent half of the last parliamentary session trying to impose reckless Highly

Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs), which would have devastated Scotland's fishing industry. While Labour's unfair trade deals have betrayed Scottish fishermen.

The Scottish Conservatives will show our unwavering support for this vital part of the rural economy by offering our fishing sector a better deal.

Commit to multi-annual funding for the fishing industry. This would provide our fishermen with financial certainty at a time of great difficulty for the sector and give them the funding they need to make the investment that will allow them to grow their businesses.

Scrap the ineffective Marine Directorate. We would incorporate the Marine Directorate's into the core Scottish Government and improve communication with the fishing industry regarding the patrolling of our waters and data on fish stocks.

Support the jobs in aquaculture while upholding marine welfare standards. We would work with industry to ensure that world leading aquaculture practices and welfare measures are in place while protecting the jobs provided by the sector.

Establish a fish processing capital grants scheme. Catch levels in



Scotland are rising. This needs to be met with an ability to process them. We would introduce a grant scheme for those already in the processing sector, and those who want to enter the processing sector, which would allow them to invest in necessary equipment and facilities to support fishermen.

Extend our New Entrants Support Scheme to the fishing sector.

Under the SNP the number of fishing vessels has fallen, as has employment. To support our food security, we need to encourage more fishermen into the sector. We would apply our New Entrants Support Scheme to the fishing sector, to provide interest free loans to support its growth.

Enact a moratorium on further offshore wind farm developments.

Offshore wind farms have a substantial impact on our fishing and coastal communities. A moratorium on these developments would allow for a full assessment to take place that could analyse the impact these farms are having on our aquaculture sector.

Oppose any new attempts to bring in Highly Protected Marine Areas. HPMA's would effectively ban fishing in large swathes of Scotland's waters and devastate coastal communities. We will oppose any attempts to bring back these plans.



Protecting our natural environment

Scotland's natural environment is one of our biggest assets – rich in natural resources, attractive to tourism and vital to the rural economy.

However, the SNP Government has failed to meet its natural environment targets and consistently showed a complete lack of understanding of Scotland's natural landscape. They have threatened our ability to tackle wildfires by pursuing muirburn licensing and have failed to deal with the growing threat of gulls.

The Scottish Conservatives want to ensure our natural environment is protected and would pursue a number of policies to protect our natural environment and all of those who live, work and visit these parts of the country.

Stop the mass industrialisation of our countryside. We would pause all major renewable energy infrastructure applications while we put in place a new system that gives

local residents a meaningful say in the process, including the power to reject such applications. Under our plans, pylons could only be used as infrastructure as a last resort.

Review the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. The Code is out of date and must reflect the needs of farmers who are reliant on people adhering to certain rules so that their farms are not littered, vandalised or harmed by problems, such as sheep worrying, which is becoming more common.

Conduct a National Parks Review. We would establish a review into Scotland's current two national parks to assess the economic and environmental impact of these parks, for the first time since they were set up two decades ago.

Support Scotland's forestry sector. We would commit to ensuring homegrown wood is used in Scottish construction including the wood panel industry. We would also publish a Scottish Timber strategy and review the progress of restoring riparian woodland and accelerating it as necessary. We

would also mitigate the unintended consequences of planting e.g. preventing the loss of moorland.

Take action to prevent wildfires and deal with them effectively when they occur. This would include a commitment to engage fully with stakeholders and communities on tackling wildfires, pause the rollout of the muirburn licensing scheme and repeal or amend it following consultation. We would also ensure our fire service has a dedicated wildfire unit to liaise with local communities.

Manage our ever-growing deer population. We would ensure that our policies support our land managers and gamekeepers to manage the overpopulation of deer in rural areas and repeal SNP legislation which makes their job harder.

Commit to no more government-backed rewilding projects until thorough assessment is carried out. The Scottish Conservatives recognise that rewilding can sometimes bring useful environmental benefits. However,



as some farmers and crofters have highlighted, it can also have an impact on our natural landscape and land users. We would commit to ensuring no more government-backed rewilding actions are agreed to before careful assessment of their impact. This would include specific consultation with farmers and crofters who would have the right to veto any proposals that would be damaging to their livelihoods. We will also oppose the re-introduction of lynx in the next Parliamentary term.

Tackle Scotland's gull problem.

Given the increasing problems caused by gulls across Scotland, we would split the dual conservation and licensing functions of NatureScot, giving the latter to Ministers or councils. We would also publish an annual report on the use of licences to manage gulls, update gull licensing conditions to ensure that public safety is protected, ensure that businesses are supported to deal with gulls.

Mitigate against species reintroduction failures and pests by establishing a Wildlife Co-existence Fund.

This Fund would be designed to mitigate the impact of reintroducing species such as beavers, which the SNP have pressed ahead with despite the negative consequences for our farmers. It would also help farmers whose livestock is put at risk due to sea eagles and tackle problems associated with geese.

Conclusion

The Scottish Conservatives are the only party to have stood up for rural Scotland during the last session of the Scottish Parliament, and we will continue to do so during the next session.

The SNP have failed our farmers, our fishermen and our rural communities, and the UK Labour Government has attacked rural Scotland with its punishing Family Farm Tax.

We have laid out sensible, common-sense proposals designed to fix many of the longstanding problems

created by this incompetent SNP Government. We want to support those who live, work or rely on the rural parts of our country, and we have created a plan to do so by listening to the people who actually live in rural Scotland.

In turn we hope to boost our rural economy, stop rural depopulation, give rural Scotland better access to healthcare, back our farmers and our fishermen, and protect our natural environment.

We cannot get Scotland working again if our rural communities don't succeed. Our plan for rural Scotland would give them the tools they

need to thrive. But this can only be done if we stop the SNP from getting a majority on 7 May.

In 2016 and in 2021, the Scottish Conservatives stopped an SNP majority in the Scottish Parliament. We can do so again, but only if you vote for the Scottish Conservatives on your peach-coloured ballot paper no matter where you live in Scotland.

That way, there will be enough Scottish Conservative MSPs elected who can deny the SNP a majority and **ensure that rural Scotland has a strong voice in the next Scottish Parliament.**





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