

A Manifesto for Rural Scotland



Foreword

Manifesto from feedback at meetings run by Scottish Rural Action in 2016, to be discussed and debated at Scottish Rural Parliament in Brechin



Arts & Culture

Opportunities to enjoy and participate in art and cultural activities enhance the wellbeing and inclusiveness of rural communities, reducing social isolation, promoting population retention and a stronger local and regional identity. We believe that:

- The intrinsic value of arts and cultural activities (including where relevant Gaelic language and culture) should be recognised and celebrated by rural communities, public and private sector agencies.



Business

Rural businesses require effective support and protection, suitable infrastructure, and equity of support and opportunity across regions and sectors. Education and training should reflect the needs of rural businesses.

We call for:

- Greater support for grass-roots business support services, which truly reflect the needs of micro and small businesses within their region.
- A review of enterprise support services to be conducted to evaluate the efficacy of those services for the types and needs of businesses within each region and sub region of Scotland.
- Direct and indirect subsidy and support for businesses to be equitable across sectors and regions.
- An Enterprise Bill to be brought forward by Scottish Government to address the current inequity in business and
- The protection of funding streams available to help private and community-led businesses.
- An extension of the empty homes scheme to include empty commercial properties.



Broadband and Mobile Phone Signal

Superfast broadband and mobile phone signal should be available to all at fair prices and speeds equitable with urban areas. Connectivity has become necessary to the social and economic sustainability of all communities. It is an essential of modern life and has the potential to address constraints and limitations arising from rural geography. For Scotland's rural economy to thrive, sufficient connectivity (a minimum of superfast broadband speeds) has to be available to all, regardless of geography. Inequity of connectivity leaves our fragile communities behind and excludes many of the one million people living in rural Scotland from participating socially and educationally and excludes them from economic opportunity. Many rural areas are struggling to keep their communities alive while knowing that superfast broadband would:

- Increase the economic attractiveness of their local region, retain citizens and businesses and attract new businesses;
- Reduce the urban-rural divide by enabling health, education and government services to be delivered online, widening access to services located in cities;
- Reduce rural isolation by allowing direct communication with family, friends and colleagues;
- Increase promotion and consumption of local crafts, foods, trade and performing arts.

We call for:

- The Scottish Government should redirect resources to quickly facilitate the provision of community/national backhaul, local backbone networks and community hubs to support access networks. This will prime the pump for Internet Service Providers to provide connectivity either commercially or through community projects, possibly including State Aid funded projects.
- Scottish Government, having made the commitment to reach 100% super fast coverage, should accept that this is a stepping stone to ultra-fast speeds and ensure that there are clear upgrade paths available to all rural networks.
- Rural communities should be supported through access to specialist advice according to their needs. This might include business planning, technical advice, help with funding, legal guidance regarding way leaves and other support. There needs to be a mechanism for accessing this support and sharing knowledge amongst community projects in a collaborative way, rather than a centralised point of blockage.

continued overleaf



Broadband and Mobile Phone Signal

- Existing rural broadband and rural initiatives and resources should be coordinated to best respond to rural broadband requirements and overcome obstacles that currently impede rural broadband deployment. These should be addressed and managed by the team responsible for reaching 100%, as a singly managed project, with clear accountability for delivery.
- There should be a Scottish Broadband Conference that brings together all stakeholders, including Scottish Government, community projects, network providers and suppliers, to evaluate the status quo and share views and solutions using an Open Space type of facilitation.



Communities and Civil Society

There are many opportunities available for communities to address the challenges they face, and where communities have capacity to do this, they are being very successful. Communities have addressed many issues which were not being effectively addressed by public services or private markets, including depopulation, broadband and meeting the welfare needs of local residents. We believe that:

- Communities have the potential to address many of their own needs when the right support, conditions and opportunities are in place.
- Communities are stronger, happier and more successful when they have greater control over their future. The public sector has to recognise this, creating a culture of support for community-led initiatives and activities, and removing barriers.
- There is a growing need to develop the capacity of some communities who are finding it harder to lead with confidence.



Democracy and Governance

There are serious and pervasive concerns about democracy and governance structures and systems within Scotland. Distant urban local authorities lack understanding of their rural constituencies. The increasing centralisation of services takes power away from communities. The relationships and impacts of every layer of rural governance from the national to the local authority to the Community Council level need to be better understood, and existing powers, potentials and obstacles reviewed. We welcome recent initiatives to examine issues of democracy. We call for:

- Further grass-roots debate on local democratic reform which is coordinated and inclusive and which seeks to communicate and build on existing proposals, identifying the next steps for empowering communities and fostering local democratic collaboration.
- Active engagement by the Scottish Government in the growing movement for change around local democracy, including addressing concerns about community council powers and budgets, community planning partnerships and the transparency of local decision-making.
- Increased understanding and development of participatory democracy as an approach, building on the example and practice of the Scottish Rural Parliament.
- Consultations, especially those conducted by public agencies, seek to proactively engage with rural communities across Scotland and within those communities, take special measures to engage with those people who are hardest to reach.
- Rural communities should work together and with Scottish Rural Action to campaign on issues, locally and nationally, of greatest importance to them and develop a powerful voice for the people of rural Scotland.



Depopulation and Demographic Changes

Depopulation and significant demographic changes are a growing concern for many rural communities. We believe our communities work best when there is a varied demographic constituency.



Education

To retain young and talented people in our rural communities and the essential services and entrepreneurship they bring to our communities, we need to provide good quality opportunities for education, training and professional development.

- Education choices should be appropriate for the community they serve.
- Better links between education and local business should be forged.
- Distant learning options should continue to be developed, and superfast broadband schemes rolled-out to support this option.
- A comprehensive, multi-agency task-force should be set-up to investigate the causes of and to identify and implement solutions to the challenges in attracting and retaining educational staff in rural parts of Scotland.



Energy

Communities should have greater power over the decisions which affect them in relation to energy production, supply and distribution, particularly where there is potentially significant environmental damage as a consequence. We believe that:

- Investment should be focused on improving the effectiveness of and diversifying renewable energy production methods.
- The financial benefits of energy production should be concentrated on the communities within the vicinity of energy production sites.
- Communities should be incentivised and better supported to deliver their own renewable energy schemes.
- Communities should have greater decision-making powers and influence over the location and types of energy production within their locality.



Environment

A high quality of life and the sustainability of rural communities and our economy depends on the positive management and protection of biodiversity, eco-systems and natural landscapes. We call for:

- Local authority and community planning and decision-making processes to give consideration to the views of local environmental and wildlife champions, as well as land managers, and to support the protection, restoration and enhancement of Scotland's environmental assets.
- Policies on agriculture, forestry and fishing to likewise seek to support (or not hinder) environmental conservation, restoration and enhancement.
- The control and mitigation of flooding, wildfires and related hazards is carried out as far as possible through adaptive land management techniques.
- Support for communities that seek to facilitate low carbon living in their local area.



Food

Rural areas are often lacking in affordable, healthy and locally-sourced food for sale while the number of clients for foodbanks in rural areas increases year on year. Rural food producers are often price-takers rather than price setters and much of the value they generate goes outwith the local community. We ask for:

- Joined-up/framework legislation on food, farming and health to channel some of the benefits of Scotland's high quality produce to local populations and producers.
- Greater opportunities in terms of land and support for individuals and communities to 'grow their own'.
- Support for local processing facilities and the integration of local produce to local distribution chains
- Better retail outlets for locally-produced food such dedicated sections in supermarkets, and more local food markets.
- Promotion and highlighting of existing local programmes and schemes with a record of success in achieving these aims.



Health, Social Services and Wellbeing

- A comprehensive, multi-agency task-force should be set-up to investigate the causes of and to identify and implement solutions to the challenges in attracting and retaining health staff in rural parts of Scotland.
- Solutions to the challenges of obtaining health and social care services for people living in remote rural Scotland are identified.
- Solutions to the mental health issues caused by rural social isolation are identified.
- Options for distance learning and professional development should continue to be developed, supported by the roll-out of superfast broadband.



Housing and Planning

Locally affordable, suitable and energy-efficiency housing is essential for rural communities to retain their population and in particular key workers, meet health and wellbeing needs, and grow their economy. We ask for:

- The Empty Homes Partnership Scheme to be extended beyond March 2017.
- Local authorities to fully exercise their powers to discourage second-home ownership and empty homes wherever this is a concern for the local community.
- Grant schemes to incentivise home improvements for the purposes of increasing energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty to be rural-proofed to ensure their suitability for implementation in rural areas.
- Further support from Government to increase the availability of affordable, suitable and energy efficient housing.
- Rural-proofing of Scotland's planning policies, and policies to allow greater input and influence from communities on the planning of new development in their area, with review of potential of extending the right to appeal granted planning permissions to individuals and communities.



Land

Land ownership, management and usage should benefit all of the people of Scotland. We call on rural communities, our government, and other interested and decision-making parties:

- To be brave, honest and open in considering and addressing issues of land ownership, management and usage.
- To keep principles of social and environmental justice at the heart of decision-making in relation to land ownership, management and usage.



Poverty & Inequalities

A fairer and more equal society would benefit everyone. It is important to be inclusive of all faiths, ethnicities, sexualities and abilities. Rural poverty and deprivation is often hidden and the higher cost of living in a rural community compounds this. We believe that:

- Accurate measurement systems and processes for rural communities are essential if we are to understand the extent of rural poverty and deprivation and measure the impact of initiatives designed to address the issue.



Rural Policing

The recent police service centralisation has raised questions about its impacts in rural Scotland. Levels of police presence and capacity to address less high-profile crimes – such as vandalism, anti-social behaviour and wildlife crime – are perceived in some cases as inadequate.

- Rural Scotland needs visible, transparent and accountable policing that is sensitive to local priorities and issues.



Tourism

Tourism is a mainstay of Scotland's rural economy, and has great potential for development through, for example, better differentiation of the attractions and amenities of different Scottish regions, support and promotion of eco- and agri-tourism sectors and opportunities for healthy outdoor activities such as cycling.

Improvements to Scotland's road and public transport infrastructure, mobile phone and broadband connectivity and limits on second home ownership (as opposed to holiday homes) would have strong co-benefits for the tourist industry and thus for the rural economy and employment.



Town & Village Regeneration

Rural people rely on their local towns and villages, as places to find goods and services, entertainment and social life. Small businesses and independent traders are important providers of rural employment and keep local money circulating within the local economy. Yet cuts to public services, unaffordable commercial rents, business rates and issues with transport including lack of public transport options and (often related) parking congestion, are depleting these centres of their vitality and viability. In some cases, access basic goods and services, entertainment and social opportunities has become out of reach for those without private transport.

Local authorities should reverse this trend by encouraging rural towns and villages to prosper through:

- investing in the public realm (e.g. surfaces, littering, disability access, public toilets); providing or supporting affordable spaces for small businesses and independent traders;
- maintaining a range of public services, such as public libraries, health and employment support services
- supporting integrated local transport services.

Rural shops and pubs can be a lifeline to the local community, particularly to those with declining mobility, and in adverse weather. Local authorities should support schemes to keep these enterprises open and operating in the interests of the community (such as community buy-in and buy-outs, 'The Pub is the Hub' etc.).



Transport

Effective, integrated and affordable transport solutions are essential for the economy of the nation and of rural communities, provide access to lifeline services and underpin the viability of rural communities for people to live in. We call for:

- Improved integration of the timetabling of public transport services and an enhancement of the duties placed on national, regional, local and private agencies to involve communities in timetabling decision-making processes
- A reduction in ferry costs for commercial vehicles to enable the exchange of goods and services between island and mainland communities.
- Ferry fare reductions for communities served by ferries outside of the current RET scheme.
- A National Transport Strategy which explicitly considers and addresses the needs of rural communities, as distinct from those of urban communities.
- The devolution of greater transport budgets and powers to the local level, with built in obligations for local authorities to collaborate where transport needs cross boundaries.
- An extension of the rural fuel subsidy to more rural areas.



Young People

Rural places need to be made more attractive to younger generations, in recognition of the energy, resourcefulness and creativity young people contribute to rural communities, businesses and social life; as well as their ability to initiate positive change towards the future. Rural places can be better for the young by:

- Valuing young people from primary school onwards, through providing a quality of education and extra-curricular activities that are on a par with urban areas, but that also raise awareness of the positives of rural living and the range of rural work options.
- Prioritising the communications, housing, transport, training and social needs of the younger generation – in particular, affordable housing, apprenticeships and innovative transport options.
- Developing policies, such as on the redeployment of neglected farm, croft and waste land, that open up more possibilities for younger people to learn food production and land management skills.
- Initiatives that support greater involvement of young people in rural life and decision making (e.g. youth community councils; youth rural parliament).



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