

To leaders of the political parties standing candidates for Scottish rural and island constituencies in the 2024 General Election

28 June 2024

Dear Party Leader

We, the organisations below, working on behalf of rural and island communities which are home to 20% of the UK population, are writing to all political parties that are standing candidates in the coming General Election.

In the face of global challenges including the climate and biodiversity emergencies, diminishing access to resources and rising cost of living, rural and island communities experience specific impacts and constraints yet, overwhelmingly, they are also the source of solutions. Underpinning rural livelihoods and innovation must be a priority for all parties in Westminster and whilst many of the immediate decisions that affect the future of these communities have been devolved to national governments, there are reserved matters that require coordinated and coherent policy action.

We call on all parties at this election to ensure that their proposed programmes for Government have properly considered the impact they have on rural communities in England, where there is no devolved administration, and that they are properly integrated with devolved responsibilities in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In particular, we call for action in four areas:

1. Devolution has given considerable powers to national administrations over important issues such as land management, housing, transport, local government, and social/health care. However, reserved matters such as regulation of financial services, competition policy, funding of infrastructure and welfare benefits are often operated in a way that makes it difficult for the UK nations to develop coherent approaches to rural and island development. We ask all Parties to consider how the operation of devolved and reserved matters can be made more collaborative and transparent in order to enable **integrated rural strategies** to be developed within each UK nation and coupled with funding schemes controlled by local communities. A good start in achieving this could be found by harmonising the approaches used to define 'rural' and, following from this, ensuring data sets, including the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, are reviewed to enable poverty in rural places to be more effectively understood and tackled.
2. The last twenty years have seen growing centralisation of public service provision to major settlements and away from rural and island communities. Often this has been a direct result of spending patterns and amounts not keeping pace with demographic change or the needs of these communities. We ask all Parties standing in the 2024 General Election to commit themselves to ensuring **fair access to public services** for people in rural areas, irrespective of where they live, including through a universally high standard of public transport and digital

communications. This is especially necessary for those living at distance from urban centres, on islands, along the borders between nations or along the borders with the Republic of Ireland.

3. People living in the more rural parts of the UK, and on islands, are as committed to achieving the transition to a decarbonised society as those in any other part of the United Kingdom. In many cases, the environment in which they live provides assets that can both help them with this transition and also help urban areas to achieve it. We ask that people living in rural areas are actively supported to achieve **a just transition to net zero** and both the UK Government and devolved administrations work together to achieve this. In particular, we ask that a constructive dialogue is developed between rural and island communities, the devolved administrations, the UK Government, and NDPBs on addressing policy and regulatory barriers to communities participating in, and fully benefiting from the green energy transition.
4. The UK has adopted an approach to delivering many public goods that relies on UK-wide regulation of private industries by agencies such as the FCA, CMA, Ofcom, Ofgem, Ofwat etc. We ask that whoever forms a new Government after 4<sup>th</sup> July, **reviews the impact on rural communities of reliance on for-profit provision of services** and thus the remit of all these regulators in relation to rural areas. We believe it is possible to give them a much stronger role in identifying markets where mitigation is needed to avoid rural communities receiving a poor or non-existent service from private providers of public goods. Part of this role should be to ensure that UK and national governments are informed of market failures, that action is taken, and that this action is properly monitored.

It is one thing to ask for action from national governments. As civil society networks that support rural and island communities throughout the UK, we also stand ready to assist a new UK Government to work with those living in our rural and island communities. We place a high value on both working and learning together, and hope you will support our commitment to cross-border community learning exchange.

While we are writing to you from Scottish Rural Action, our colleagues from Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), the Northern Ireland Rural Community Network and the Welsh cluster of rural development organisations, coordinated by PLANED are contacting the parties who are standing candidates in the other nations.

Yours sincerely



Theona Morrison  
Chair, Scottish Rural Action

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