



# ON THE HIGHLANDS' AND ISLANDS' SIDE

**On May 7th choose a Scottish Government that works for Scotland. Choose an SNP government that, day in and day out, is always on Scotland's side.**

**Your first SNP vote at this election will deliver an SNP Government. It delivers a better NHS, GP walk-in clinics, help with the cost of living, the first-time buyers' deposit, a growing economy, and a massive increase in childcare that leaves no one behind.**

**Your second SNP vote delivers independence. It secures a majority that will lay the path to a referendum. A referendum that we will win.**

**Here's what we'll do for the Highlands and Islands.**

## FAIRER HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

### Food Pricing

That includes delivering multi-year funding to underpin practical help, including protecting the Scottish Welfare Fund, and working with Children First to introduce a National Front Door, offering accessible support at any time by phone and online.

That's why we will take a public health intervention to establish statutory price ceilings on a basket of 20 to 50 essential food items at large supermarkets, such as bread, milk and eggs to provide tangible relief to families struggling with grocery bills, ensuring that necessities for a balanced diet remain affordable.

The system would require large supermarkets to make one example line of the listed essential food items available at the capped price and would not require

them to make every variation of that type of food they stock available at that price. As with Minimum Unit Pricing, we would introduce a sunset clause through the legislation to ensure that it was effective in order to continue.

Crucially, this will be implemented alongside a robust support framework designed to shield Scottish producers with support mechanisms and monitoring to ensure that this will not be allowed to impact on farmers and food producers and we will work with them to ensure Supermarkets make the change.

### Rural and Island Housing Plan

We know that our rural and island communities face unique housing challenges, from limited affordable supply and high build costs, to pressure from second homes and the migration of younger people.

Our £75 million Rural and Island Housing Fund will help address this by supporting the construction of more affordable homes of all tenures in rural Scotland.

This includes £25 million Rural Affordable Housing for Key Workers for local authorities to identify affordable homes for key workers in rural areas and support the retention and attraction of key workers in these areas and £20 million through the Rural and Island House grant scheme to support more families to live in rural areas.

We will also invest in our crofting communities, through measures such as the Croft House Grant Scheme that has delivered £24.5 million of investment under the SNP.

## Youth Built

We will introduce a package of measures to help young people build a home and make it easier to remain in their communities. We will remove land transfer fees for people under the age of 30 for the purpose of building a single domestic housing unit. We will provide targeted support of £10,000 for households to construct a single unit, specifically for a primary resident - not for rental. This will initially be concentrated on our highland and island communities.

We will take bold action to tackle the impact of second homes in rural and island communities. To reverse depopulation and support communities, the SNP government has given local authorities the powers to manage the numbers of second homes in their area and has worked with Community Land Scotland to find the right land to deliver more housing in rural areas.

We will work with local authorities to introduce more targeted market interventions in areas facing acute housing pressures, including powers to better regulate second home ownership, prioritise homes for permanent residents and support communities where local housing markets are being distorted.

## PROSPEROUS HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

### Childcare

Every child in Scotland deserves the best start in life, which is why we are committed to eradicating child poverty and giving families the support they need. We have always recognised that a child's earliest years are the most crucial for their development and future success.

That's why we will extend childcare support to every child in our country from 9 months old to the end of primary school by the end of the next parliament. This new system will be designed to fit around families - rather than expecting families to fit around the system. The new system will give support 52 weeks a year and mean families benefit from between £1,400 up to over £11,000 dependent on need. Helping both with the cost of living and helping parents take up employment opportunities that also grow our economy.

### £2 Bus Fare Cap

Our vision for transport is rooted in affordability, accessibility and sustainability. We have made real progress towards this with free bus travel for under 22s and over 60s. But we want to go further. That's why by the end of the parliament we will take forward legislation to put in place a £2 bus fare cap across Scotland, building on our pilot in the Highlands, Orkney, and Shetland.

This step of providing more affordable bus travel will help with modal shift and reduce household costs. Our action will benefit families, the economy, and the environment.

We have taken action in government to support local transport authorities to have more flexibility to respond to their own unique transport challenges through franchising, using powers created in the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. We will carry out a rural bus service review to explore further opportunities for franchising with a focus on Scotland's rural communities. This builds on existing work to support Local Transport Authorities to build business cases for local bus improvements through franchising, backed by £4 million investment in 2026-27.

In addition, we will support the use of franchising to guarantee socially necessary routes in underserved areas through franchising while creating greater alignment of investment with our net-zero goals.

## **Tackling depopulation**

We know that Scotland is facing a number of demographic challenges, including a falling birth rate which is coinciding with an increasingly ageing population, and a changing relationship with migration following Brexit and the end of free movement.

Scotland's population change is not felt equally across the country, and we know that our rural communities are facing unique challenges. Learning from the 'Move to Dumfries and Galloway' campaign, we will extend the Addressing Depopulation Fund to support local authorities to take forward pilots, encouraging remote workers, young families and young professionals to make the region home.

## **Rural Renewal Bill**

The SNP cares passionately about rural Scotland – rural and island communities are at the very heart of our identity and our economy.

Our rural industries are ripe with potential for new growth and new opportunities. Rural and island communities are home to Scotland's world-class food and drink producers, fishing and aquaculture sectors, pioneering businesses and renewable energy potential.

That's why over the course of the next parliament we will consult on, and bring forward, a new Rural Renewal Bill. As we develop the Bill we will explore:

- Rural planning reform, improving permitted development rights, such as for small-scale renewable energy production, business diversification and opportunities to streamline processes.

- Review industry levy bodies across the rural and marine sectors.
- Create new small land holdings to support rural repopulation.
- Review and revitalise support and opportunities for crofting for new entrants.
- Action to protect unique Scottish landscapes such as the machair, including on options on species management.
- The bill will continue our land reform journey and consider a range of strategic proposals. It will also include steps to make land ownership transparent, implementing robust anti-avoidance measures, supporting existing tenants and providing new long-term opportunities for progressing farmers, and enhancing opportunities and support for community right to buy and ownership.

## **Scotland's Agriculture & Food Production**

We have delivered the most generous package of direct farming and crofting support in the UK, investing over £660 million in support to agriculture. We are committed to supporting active farming and food production with direct payments - to provide certainty to the industry in stark contrast to policies in other parts of these islands. Farmers and food producers are vital contributors to our economy and to rural Scotland.

We will ensure support is better targeted towards active farmers and crofters, including new approaches to advice to build on whole farm plans to develop individual farm action plans which support actions for nature and climate and sustainable food production.

We will help farmers and crofters deliver for nature by ensuring appropriately targeted support through the new 4 tier framework - this will include increasing the level of support provided to Tier 2, 3 and 4. This will directly support nature and climate-friendly farming, ensuring agriculture remains resilient in the face

of climate change impacts and protects our natural landscapes.

Small producers and crofters have an important place in our food systems, which is why we have continued funding the small producers fund with funding tripled to £1.5 million in this year.

We are committed to ensuring that public procurement is improved to better support local and sustainable producers. As part of this we will establish a public sector food procurement taskforce - working with stakeholders at pace to review key barriers to local procurement and make recommendations to strengthen local procurement which supports local economies and reduces food miles.

## **Fishing and Coastal Communities**

Our fishing and aquaculture sectors are the backbone of many rural and coastal communities providing crucial employment and investment across Scotland. Our focus is on supporting the sector to ensure it has a sustainable and prosperous future.

We are committed to improving fish welfare and streamlining consenting processes to support innovation and investment which is crucial to the future of the aquaculture sector. Central to this will be the Sustainable aquaculture innovation centre which we will continue to support.

Our iconic wild salmon populations are under pressure – we are determined to take actions to support wild salmon and the businesses which depend upon them. We will continue to implement the range of measures identified through our plan for 2023-28 working with key stakeholders and businesses.

Our fishing sector and the associated supply chain companies including our processing sector are the

lifeblood of coastal communities across the nation, that is why we will always champion balanced policy which both enables the sector to flourish whilst supporting improvements in the protection of our marine environment. We have supported the sector with £16 million of investment this year, and we will continue to work to support smaller fishing businesses, not least in the processing sector.

The recent decision by the UK Government to allocate only 7.78% of the Fisheries and Coastal Growth Fund to Scotland was an insult to the Scottish fishing industry – we will continue to work with fishing stakeholders to reverse that decision and ensure investment flows to Scotland.

## **Tourism**

Scotland is a leader in 21st century tourism, which delivers the very best for our visitors, our businesses, our people, our communities and our environment.

In the next parliament, we will invest further in the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) – which aims to improve the visitor experience in rural parts of Scotland that are experiencing visitor management issues.

## **Digital Economy**

We will accelerate the rollout of full fibre broadband in Scotland by supporting providers to reach more rural/remote areas. We will establish a digital skills development initiative, to empower digitally excluded people to gain the skills necessary to access digital services and employment opportunities.

We will also commission a feasibility study to explore potential options for a subsea cable between Shetland and mainland Scotland which would provide high-speed internet and telecommunications for businesses and communities across the island.

## Ending rural mobile ‘notspots’

We recognise the vital importance of good digital connectivity – for work, for business and for day-to-day life. We will put an end to mobile ‘notspots’ by investing a further £29.4 million in the Scottish 4G Infill Programme (S4GI), accelerating digital connectivity across rural and island Scotland and ensuring rural communities are not left behind.

We will target investment in areas with limited or no reliable signal, delivering new infrastructure that improves coverage for residents, businesses and visitors.

We will also explore the feasibility of rolling out further connections to low earth orbit (LEO) satellites, similar to the connection between OneWeb’s LEO and Papa Stour, Shetland, to strengthen the resilience of digital connectivity and infrastructure for rural and island communities.

## HEALTHY HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

### Reducing waiting times

We want to build on the significant progress we have made to reduce NHS waiting times. We have invested to drive down waiting times in the past year we will ensure that dedicated funding of at least £200 million – up £90 million - for improving waiting times is in place for each year of the coming parliament.

Through investment and NHS renewal we will ensure no patient waits longer than 26 weeks for treatment by the end of the parliament.

### GP walk-in clinics

We are wholly committed to ensuring that everyone has timely access to quality care close to their home. To do this, we are taking forward new ideas, including a network of new walk-in GP clinics, open 7 days a week, no appointment needed and without the 8am rush. We will start by piloting 30 sites before rolling out to the rest of the country.

Backed by £36 million of investment, we have committed to an initial 16 sites across Scotland in Shetland, Benbecula, Moray, Invergordon, Dunoon. Several of these sites are now up and running.

We know people are keen to see more of these walk-in clinics, so we will commit to expanding to at least a further 14 sites. We will scope options with health boards to deliver these services in communities including in Inverness.

### Capital

We will invest in Scotland’s NHS estate and in state-of-the-art equipment like MRI scanners, CT scanners and imaging equipment. We will also increase the number of mobile MRI and CT scanners in Scotland to mitigate the impact of people having to travel long distances for the scans they need.

Work is already well underway on major capital projects including replacements for Belford Hospital and Barra’s St Brendan’s Hospital.

We will use those projects to deliver a standardised model for further centres in Inverness.

We will also continue our programme of refurbishment within the NHS estate, including our commitment to refurbishment in the Caithness General Hospital and Gilbert Bain Hospital.

## **Workforce in Rural and Island Communities**

We will respond directly to the concerns of rural and island communities to ensure workforce planning accounts for the unique challenges, including revising the 'Golden Hellos' initiatives to attract more GPs, consultants and dentists to rural and island communities.

We will also continue the expansion of NHS Near Me, a programme supporting the roll-out of technology and training to enable web-based video consultations and access to specialist services without the need to travel.

## **24/7 Urgent Care in Skye**

We will ensure implementation of recommendations made by Prof Sir Lewis Ritchie for Portree Hospital and its out-of-hours care services, including keeping a 24/7 urgent care model, preserving in-patient bed provision and working with the NHS to bring forward more options for flexible contracts and rotating placements to ensure staff can maintain their skills and knowledge.

## **Access to healthcare**

We will extend financial support for air fares for people living in the Highlands and Islands who need to travel for NHS appointments through the Highlands and Islands Patient Travel Scheme, ensuring geography is never a barrier to accessing healthcare.

Building on existing travel support, we will work with NHS Highland and regional transport providers to expand eligibility and reduce the cost of travelling to essential appointments for patients and, where appropriate, accompanying carers. This will help ease financial pressures on island and rural families, improve access to specialist treatment and ensure people can get the care they need, wherever they live.

## **SKILLED HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS**

### **Islands Scholarship**

To support widening access for learners on our islands, we will introduce a new £300,000 Islands Scholarship to encourage learners from Scotland's islands to pursue a postgraduate degree.

### **Rural midwifery apprenticeships**

To strengthen Scotland's maternity workforce and protect access to local services, we will establish a new midwifery apprenticeship pathway, targeted at rural and island communities.

Working with universities and rural health boards, we will develop earn while you learn routes into midwifery that allow people to train closer to home while gaining practical experience in local maternity settings. By expanding routes into the profession, we will ensure families across rural Scotland can continue to access safe, high-quality maternity care closer to home.

### **Skills & Apprenticeships**

We will increase the number of apprenticeships to deliver 150,000 over the Parliament. We will introduce an Apprenticeship Accelerator Grant, backed by the Apprenticeship Levy, as a targeted intervention which will ensure that young people, who will make up our future workforce, have the opportunity through apprenticeships to build their confidence, gain industry insight and develop valuable skills that employers require.

## SUSTAINABLE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

### Connecting our rural and island communities

Since our introduction of the Road Equivalent Tariff in 2008, islanders, businesses and visitors have benefitted from lower-cost ferry fares. We will retain this as the basis for future fares structure for islanders and non-islanders alike.

We are supporting the people and economy of the Northern Isles by removing seasonal ferry fares for islanders. The removal of mid and peak season ferry fares for eligible residents of Orkney and Shetland will help even more islanders sustainably access work, connect with family and friends, and benefit from education and training opportunities.

We recognise that governance structures for Scotland's west coast ferries need streamlining and responsibilities made clearer. We will build on the work done in Project Neptune to take forward structural reform to improve accountability, transparency and efficiency for our lifeline ferry services.

We recognise the transformative role that fixed links - tunnels, bridges and causeways - can play in improving island connectivity. By removing the constraints of weather, increasing capacity, and reducing travel times, fixed links can deliver lasting benefits for communities, businesses, and visitors alike. We will support Shetland Island's Council's exploration of financing models and promote investment opportunities in fixed links projects.

### Forestry & Native Woodlands

We will expand Scotland's native woodlands through funding 18,000 ha of woodland creation annually by 2029, with at least 40% of new native woodland by 2045. To protect our native woodlands from threats we will support firm deer control incentives, implement a national deer management and venison. We will also complete the National Register of Ancient Woodland, and strengthen biosecurity among other actions.

We will set an ambitious target of 23% canopy cover in urban areas to drive action to increase planting and build on our existing work to encourage an increase in tree canopy cover in urban areas.

### Climate adaptation

Adapting to the impacts of climate change is at the heart of our mission to improve the wellbeing of people living in Scotland, now and in the future.

We will support local authorities to adapt our coasts to better respond to the rise in sea levels and reduce the risks associated with coastal erosion through a £14m Coastal Change Adaption fund by the end of the parliament. We will also publish coastal erosion plans for all 24 coastal authorities with an erodible shoreline by 2029.

We will allocate additional investment of £15 million in flood mitigation and prevention, with resources targeted in areas most impacted by flooding.

## SECURE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

### Improving Roads

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We were the first Government to commit to dualling the A9 and we will complete this by 2035. The A9 is a lifeline for Highland communities and Scotland's economy. We are driving forward the dualling of the A9 and the A96.

As we have set out in our Infrastructure Investment Pipeline, we will explore a long-term solution for the A83 Rest and Be Thankful.

To deliver better roads we will establish the 'Better Surfaces' fund to support local government capital expenditure in fixing potholes, carrying out resurfacing, and improving drainage from roads across the country. This could deliver up to £350 million of supported investment over the next parliament.

We will commission an accident black spot review to identify and improve dangerous junctions and stretches of road across Scotland. The review will consider collision data, traffic patterns and road design to pinpoint high-risk locations and deliver practical safety improvements, prevent collisions and improve driver safety.