

Labour

Listening

in Rural

Communities



Intro

Labour wants a Scotland of opportunity for all – rural and urban alike. Despite our success in developing rural areas over the last eight years, key challenges remain. A recent OECD report into Scotland's rural communities highlighted that health and education indicators show that rural areas are performing well compared with the rest of Scotland. Scotland's rural regions have the highest level of tertiary education attainment among predominantly rural regions in the OECD. The UHI Millennium Institute has played a crucial role in opening up new opportunities.

The same report notes that our most fragile and remote areas suffer from lower levels of employment, a relative lack of economic progress, with rural poverty and low wages remaining as key issues.

It highlights four key challenges going forward:

- addressing land property and housing related issues;
- economic diversification in key emerging sectors such as tourism and energy production;
- service delivery improvements both to rural citizens and to businesses
- actions to identify and exploit rural-urban linkages

Our priorities for education, health, crime and justice, housing and full employment aim to benefit all Scottish people, wherever they live. It is our view that growing vibrant rural communities is the best way to sustain rural services and this is at the heart of what we want to achieve. That is why we are keen to hear the views of people who live in rural communities about their priorities, what they need from government and how Labour can work with them.

Building on our previous achievements

In government we were focussed on growing the rural population and ensuring that rural areas were able to reap the benefits of economic success. In opposition, we remain committed to investing in our rural areas, with a commitment to decent public services such as new affordable rural housing, more reliable transport networks and support for our rural schools.

During the first and second terms of the Scottish Parliament, Labour led the way in many rural policy areas, including delivering an ambitious programme of land reform, giving communities rights to buy the land that they live and work on; supporting crofting reform, to ensure a secure future for crofters and crofting tenure; and introducing an aquaculture strategy to balance the sustainable development of the fish farming industry – socially, economically and environmentally. We also created Scotland's first national parks in Loch Lomond and the Cairngorms.

In terms of the rural economy, we invested in broadband connectivity to connect every school and library and to enable tele-working and business development in rural areas. We also took action via our economic strategy to make rural development a priority for the Enterprise Networks. Labour's Rural Development Small Awards Fund (RDSAF) helped lower unemployment in rural communities by offering financial support to people in rural areas so that they could identify and agree their community needs and the best way to meet them. We also invested £29 million to allow a reshaping of our fishing industry to ensure its future viability.

In government, Labour invested record amounts in rural transport infrastructure – in ferries, air services and with the rural transport fund, supporting rural and community bus services where commercial bus services would not operate. Our air fares discount scheme was highly successful and led to a similar pledge for ferry fare reductions to all our islands.

But a successful rural economy also needs good rural services. That is why in government, Scottish Labour protected important local services, including the development of rural housing and protecting pressured areas from the right to buy. We extended the scope of the rural rate relief scheme to singly owned petrol stations, public houses/small hotels/inns and small food shops.

Working constructively in Opposition

The SNP tries to portray itself as the party of rural Scotland. In opposition, they were keen to jump on every bandwagon, support every cause and trumpet every interest. But in Government the SNP's budget has meant cuts in vital local services for the vulnerable, drastic cuts and closures in the voluntary sector and there has not been a new school commissioned with new government money since Labour was in power.

In government, the SNP's actions have failed Scotland's rural communities on many levels:

- 1.** The revised formula to allocate money to health boards will reduce the share of health spending rural health boards including Borders, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland and Western Isles
- 2.** The Highlands and Islands economy has been left vulnerable by slashing Highlands and Islands Enterprise budget
- 3.** They have set back the regeneration of the Borders by delaying the Borders Rail Link
- 4.** The decision to freeze the Bus Operators Grant leaves remote and rural communities at risk of losing vital public transport links
- 5.** Ending the rural transport fund leaves rural transport users with no guarantee that bus services they currently enjoy will continue.
- 6.** Put a question mark over the future of the Agricultural Wages Board which was established to protect rural workers.
- 7.** Rural communities are more vulnerable to flooding as a result of the SNP decision to end the budget councils could previously apply for.
- 8.** The ferry discount scheme (RET) has only been applied to one set of islands, at the expense of others. Ferry prices have rocketed in the Argyll and Clyde area and stayed the same in Orkney and Shetland.
- 9.** Their new entrant farmers scheme for farming is millions of pounds short of what was promised and the Rural stewardship scheme is underfunded.
- 10.** They have failed on rural housing, undermining the work of vital rural housing associations and dumping their manifesto promise of £2000 for first time buyers.
By contrast, Labour has been working to secure a better deal for Scotland's rural communities.

We have argued that we need to support rural buses and extend the national concessionary scheme to community transport in order to make services viable for local communities.

Labour recognises the vital role that town centres have in our rural communities. We want to see investment in them which ensures their long term viability. For that reason, we stood on a platform of regenerating town centres at the last election. We were committed to establishing Town Centre Trusts to regenerate towns across Scotland, with a fund to encourage investment. We will continue to press for support for Scotland's town centres so that they are easier and more attractive for small businesses to invest in.

Supporting our rural economy and profitability in rural industries is also vital. Labour believes more can be done to promote farming and crofting, along with an expansion of local food processing, more environmentally and animal welfare friendly farming practices, and the diversification of rural economic activities so that we create economic prosperity, and more jobs in rural Scotland with better pay. Labour does not support the early review of the Agricultural Wages Board, and would not support its abolition.

The development of infrastructure to make local food processing more affordable and accessible to those on low incomes and greater uptake via public procurement lies at the heart of Labour's commitment to rural communities – a tangible link between urban and rural Scotland. Locally produced fresh food used by our schools, hospitals and public sector will generally create more stable markets for our food producers, as the EU's changes in agricultural support take effect.

Of course, we recognise the importance of creating and retaining jobs in sustaining strong rural communities. In government and in opposition, Labour has been focussed on creating jobs and opportunities for all. Our proposals on skills are currently before Parliament and aim to ensure that all young people who are suitably qualified are able to access an apprenticeship on leaving school. If this piece of legislation passes, it will be vital in attracting and retaining young people in rural areas. Our focus on skills for life will also work in favour of older workers, giving them the opportunity to re-skill when moving out of traditional industries.

We will continue to campaign for the development of fair trade procurement and community initiatives, so that consumers purchasing goods in Scotland are able to support investment in local community facilities such as health and education, fairer pay and higher environmental standards for workers in developing countries.

Investment in the management of our natural landscapes will help the development of our tourist industry and generate green tourism opportunities. We believe that there is the opportunity for our forests to play a more significant role in tackling climate change, with economic, environmental and community benefits to be gained from promoting the industry. Supporting the development of the emerging biomass industry should be a key priority, with local wood supply for combined heat and power systems, along with maximising the potential use of wood for the construction and house building industry.

Your views

Labour MSPs want to hear your thoughts on what are the needs and aspirations of rural Scotland. What can be done at Holyrood to improve the opportunities and options for hard working families in rural communities? What do you want to see Opposition MSPs doing to ensure the Scottish government delivers for people in your local area?

The feedback you give will shape Labour's Parliamentary strategy at Holyrood and ensure Labour MSPs are able to best promote the interests of rural Scotland in the Chamber and hold the Scottish government to account most effectively on your behalf

Working together we can build strong, vibrant and growing rural communities, greater economic prosperity and a more just and equal society.

You can send your views to Sarah Boyack MSP at M1.01 The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh EH99 1SP or by email to **rural@labourlistening.org.uk**