

Scottish Countryside Alliance Manifesto

Scottish Parliamentary
Election 2026



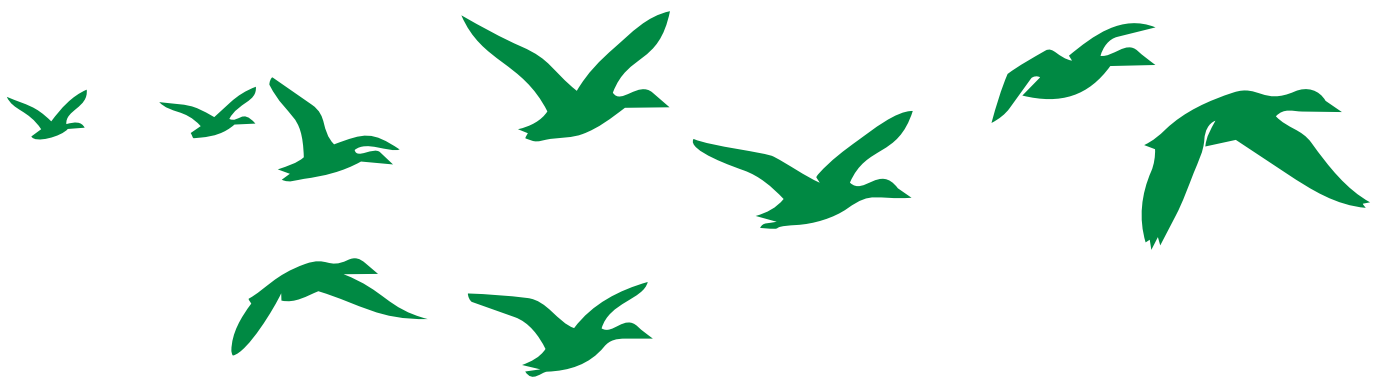
Reconnect with rural Scotland

Introduction

The Scottish Countryside Alliance represents all aspects of rural life and our manifesto sets out how the next Scottish government can better support rural communities and reconnect positively with rural voters.

The current government has lost the trust of our rural communities. A recent Scottish Countryside Alliance survey found 100% of respondents did not feel the Scottish government understands and represents the needs of rural Scotland, with comments citing an urban central belt focus. This disconnect must change so rural communities can thrive and excel in a modern Scotland.

The future Scottish government could unlock the full potential of the countryside by promoting opportunities for growth, fostering innovation and encouraging a cultural shift in policymaking. All policy, from tackling crime to land management, must be balanced, based on sound evidence, respect the views of communities and be rural-proofed.



The Scottish Countryside Alliance manifesto sets out how the next Scottish government can create thriving rural communities by committing to:



Protect
Scotland's rural
way of life and
rich heritage



Connect
rural
Scotland



Grow
the rural economy
by investing in
local businesses



Support
our countryside
with rural-proofed
policies



The next Scottish government must commit to providing solutions on how to unlock the full potential of the countryside by:

- ♦ Establishing a dedicated **Countryside Champion** to act as a liaison between rural areas and the government, ensuring rural concerns are addressed and integrated into national policy decisions.
- ♦ Publishing a **Rural Community Impact Assessment (RCIA)** when a proposed policy, development or project is likely to have a significant impact on rural communities.
- ♦ Creating an annual **State of the Countryside Report** to provide up-to-date, data-driven insights into the economic, environmental and social health of rural areas to inform policy development and raise awareness of rural issues.

I. Protect Scotland's rural way of life and rich heritage

The rural voice must be central to policymaking. Local and traditional knowledge in land management should be valued and utilised. Legislation must be balanced so rural viewpoints are not disregarded in favour of central belt politics. The next Scottish government must listen and learn from communities that have lived and worked on the land for generations. Constant interference, misinformation and attacks, particularly from animal rights groups, risk further eroding Scotland's rural heritage and culture, threatening its viability for future generations.

Many rural livelihoods, especially those tied to shooting, fishing and land management, are under increasing pressure. Scotland's cultural heritage, from salmon fishing and deer stalking to grouse shooting, must be preserved and celebrated. They play a vital role in sustaining local communities and the wider countryside.

"The next Scottish government should embrace and work with those who know and work the land and on the land. They should carefully review their policies on mass tree planting and on the burning of heather moors by following the science rather than the ranting of political activists"

(SCA Scottish Elections Survey respondent, Angus)



We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Enable the stewards of our countryside to manage wildlife in ways that sustain ecosystems and helps nature recover and thrive.
- ♦ Ensure that licensing schemes for wildlife management are workable and fit for purpose, working with relevant organisations to develop them.
- ♦ Listen to robust scientific evidence and the needs and views of the experts on the ground to make informed decisions on rural policy.



Scotland's diverse landscapes

Scotland's landscapes are famed throughout the world. Proven land management practices such as muirburn are key to their success, together with careful regeneration and considered development. Poorly planned afforestation and rewilding have irreversibly damaged large parts of Scotland's biodiversity, ignoring evidence and community concerns. This must stop.

Traditional land management practices can be integrated with other forms of regeneration and even rewilding, but communities and evidence must be incorporated into all decision-making. Species control, benefitting biodiversity and livestock protection must be supported, and not abolished and made impossible.

The UK is home to around three-quarters of the world's heather moorland with 70% of that found in Scotland

Scotland boasts incredibly diverse landscapes, featuring 354 distinct landscape types, 90% of the UK's high mountain habitat, and over 790 islands



We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Recognise muirburn as essential for moorland management and wildfire mitigation, supported by a clear and accessible licensing scheme.
- ♦ Balance traditional and modern land management approaches to maintain healthy ecosystems and resilient landscapes.
- ♦ Engage local communities in decision-making, ensuring biodiversity monitoring and ecosystem outcomes are evidence-led and locally informed.

2. Connect rural Scotland

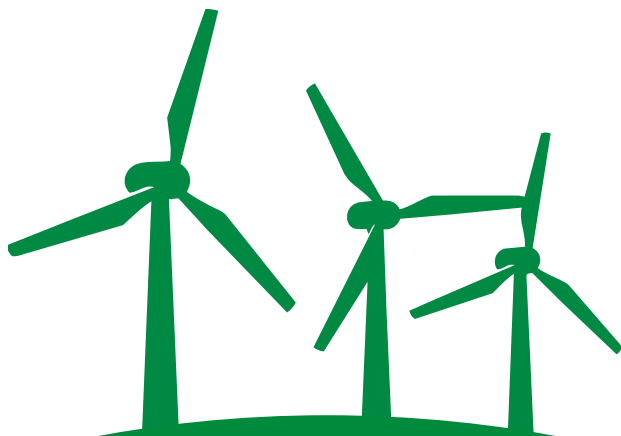
Rural communities face rapid change, from energy infrastructure to digital connectivity and transport challenges. Ensuring that Scotland's countryside is connected, resilient and able to benefit from these developments is essential for thriving communities, sustainable economic growth and quality of life.

Land use change

Electricity infrastructure is increasingly dominating our countryside, driven by the rapid expansion of offshore and onshore wind, solar farms and associated development. Scotland's rural landscapes must be protected from unchecked proliferation of renewable infrastructure, with a clear 'rooftop-first' approach to solar power. Where energy infrastructure must be located on productive farmland, it should be sensitively designed to minimise visual and environmental impact. Crucially, rural communities must see tangible benefits from energy schemes, including access to discounted power for local homes and businesses.

"I get the impression that rural land is more treated simply as a commodity, a place where substantial money can be made out of forestry, windfarm planning and solar farms and battery storage. The needs of rural communities don't really get a look in"

(SCA Scottish Elections Survey respondent, Highlands)



We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Prioritise digital connectivity in rural areas so that it matches urban areas of Scotland.
- ♦ Integrate digital infrastructure planning with rural economic development, education and public services.
- ♦ Provide support and funding for digital skills and training in rural communities to ensure people can fully benefit from new connectivity.

Transport

Local transport services are severely lacking, with too many people having to travel long distances for work, education, hospital appointments and to access other essential services. Road infrastructure should continue being modernised to properly connect rural Scotland.

**Only 40%
of rural
communities
in Scotland
have access to
regular local
bus services**

“The Tain to Portmahomack bus service was cut over two years ago, with a pilot bus service provided in its place, running only on Tuesdays and Thursdays. School children attending high school in Tain are unable to attend after school clubs due to the cut in bus services and local residents cannot rely on public transport to travel to work or healthcare appointments.”

(Ross-shire Journal)

We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Bring forward the long-delayed duelling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness earlier than the current completion date of 2035.
- ♦ Invest in local bus services to ensure reliable access to work, education and healthcare.
- ♦ Ensure transport planning considers vulnerable groups, including the elderly, students and low-income households.



3. Grow the rural economy

A thriving rural economy is vital to Scotland's food production, environment and communities. Regenerative farming can improve profitability, enhance nutrition and reduce reliance on energy, yet farmers are being squeezed by increasing costs and low margins.

Scotland's landscapes attract millions of visitors each year, creating economic opportunity but also putting pressure on roads and local facilities. Infrastructure must be fit for purpose so tourism supports, rather than strains, rural communities and businesses.

Local, independent businesses, pubs, village shops, post offices and small hotels are the backbone of rural life. Supporting them sustains the rural economy, encourages visitors beyond major destinations and helps prevent rural depopulation.

'Far better support for small businesses with opportunities and help for local start-ups'.

(SCA Scottish Elections Survey respondent, Perth and Kinross)

We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Incentivise and encourage new entrants into farming and other land-based vocations to build a secure future for rural Scotland.
- ♦ Develop a 'countryside for all' by investing in visitor facilities and rural infrastructure that are accessible, safe and welcoming, while supporting communities and protecting the environment.
- ♦ Provide business support funding in rural communities. Village shops, post offices and pubs are often a lifeline for rural residents.

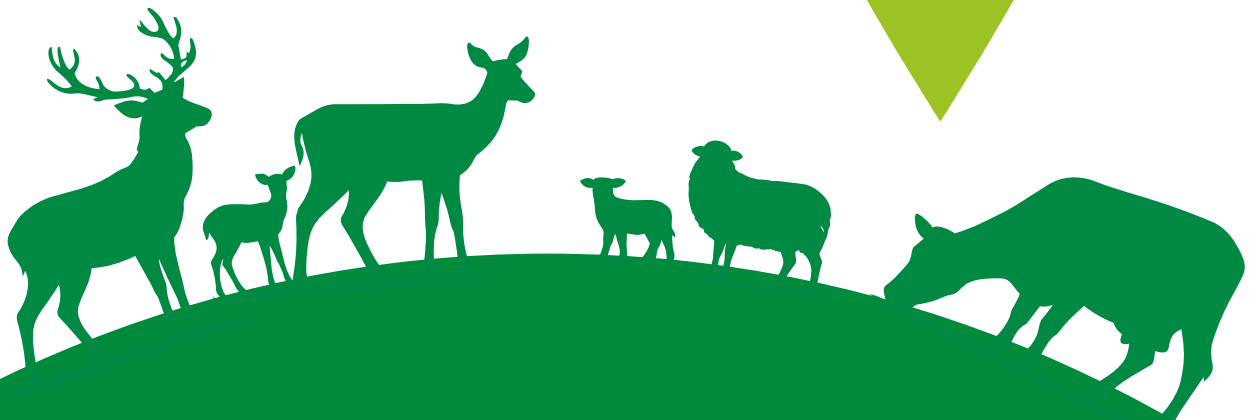


Supporting the rural economy through food and drink

Local food production is a vital part of Scotland's rural economy. Local authorities spend around £83 million each year on food procurement, including groceries, frozen foods, meats, milk, fruit and vegetables and baked goods, yet only around 34% of this spend is on Scottish products. By increasing the use of locally grown produce we can strengthen rural businesses, support farmers and keep money circulating within the local economy.

Our children are the future of the countryside. Ensuring every child is well-nourished and has access to safe, high-quality food is both a health and economic priority. Scotland has a proud history of good quality, home-grown produce and we should focus on growing local, eating local and reducing ultra-processed foods in schools.

**Just 34% of
Scotland's
£83m public
food spend
goes to local
producers**



We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Ensure at least 50% of food products used in the public sector are locally sourced or produced in Scotland and the UK.
- ♦ Incentivise deer managers to produce good quality venison by supporting domestic and international markets and promoting it across the public sector.
- ♦ Develop a 'blue tractor' scheme that ensures consumers can buy Scottish produce with confidence, supporting Scottish farmers and producers.

4. Support our countryside

Rural-proofed policies are essential if rural communities are to feel supported and able to thrive. From policing and public services to housing, healthcare and education, government must ensure rural Scotland is not treated as an afterthought.

Rural crime

A recent Countryside Alliance Rural Crime Survey found 94% of respondents believe crime is significant in their community, up from 84% in 2020.

While the cost of rural crime in Scotland fell by 33% in 2024, perceptions of how police respond to rural crime remains a concern with 56% of respondents thinking the police do not take rural crime seriously and 43% of victims did not report their experience of crime.

“Farmers are very easy victims. Perpetrators know who you are and where you live. Retaliation against you is extremely easy for them to commit completely anonymously and get away with it entirely, hence why most farmers just are forced to take it lying down”.

(2024 SCA Rural Crime survey respondent)

We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ◆ Investigate why rural communities feel the police do not take rural crime seriously.
- ◆ Tackle underreporting due to perceptions that the police will not act.
- ◆ Promote initiatives to strengthen relations between rural communities and Police Scotland, including stable community officer assignments.



Rural depopulation

Rural depopulation is not inevitable, it is the consequence of long-term policy choices. For rural Scotland to thrive, it must be a realistic and attractive place to live, work and raise families.

A lack of suitable, affordable housing remains a major barrier, with inflexible planning systems preventing local people from staying in their own communities. Centralisation of healthcare has increased travel times, reduced access to services and weakened the resilience of rural areas, while also removing skilled jobs from local economies.

Education is equally critical. School closures and mothballing undermine community confidence and accelerate population decline, while limited access to rural apprenticeships and land-based education restricts opportunities for young people to build careers in the countryside.

Addressing depopulation requires joined-up thinking across housing, healthcare, education and infrastructure, grounded in the realities of rural Scotland.

“Too many school catchments are in a terminal spiral - as the local school gets too small families choose to live elsewhere, reinforcing the trend”.

(SCA Scottish Elections Survey respondent, South Ayrshire)

“Far too much NHS work has been shifted away from rural areas and centralised in the big cities. We need better healthcare in the rural areas, which would also provide vital jobs in rural areas too”.

(SCA Scottish Elections Survey respondent, Edinburgh)

We call on the next Scottish government to:

- ♦ Streamline planning policies to support self-build and small-scale developments, protect green belt and prime agricultural land and promote affordable rural housing.
- ♦ Ensure rural healthcare meets local needs by creating community hubs providing medical and dental services closer to home, including maternity and community care.
- ♦ Strengthen rural education from nursery to further education, support apprenticeships and land-based courses and provide young people with the skills to build careers in the countryside.



About the Scottish Countryside Alliance

The Scottish Countryside Alliance is the political campaigning force that promotes and protects the rural way of life, representing the interests of our members, supporters, and rural communities in parliament, in the media and on the ground. As part of the Countryside Alliance, we have over 100,000 members and supporters across the UK.

We are the only membership organisation that campaigns across all of rural affairs, including cultural, economic, environmental and community issues. Our team in Scotland and London have many years of experience in campaigning to protect the rural way of life, whether that is in hunting, shooting, fishing, or for rural communities. We have an interest in Scottish rural matters and we are fortunate to have built up some excellent relationships with current MPs and MSPs across all political parties.



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