

**RURAL ACTION PLAN**  
**February 2015**

**SUPERFAST BROADBAND FOR ALL:** we plan to get all of rural Scotland online to help families, businesses and charities.

- *Prioritise and accelerate rural superfast broadband rollout*
  - Nothing is more important than broadband in rural Scotland – for families, businesses and the third sector
  - Over £400 million is being invested in Scotland already
  - More than two million homes and businesses have been linked to the superfast network, including 220,000 premises in Scotland
  - We will make it our priority to speed up the delivery of the 95% target and look for solutions and funding to cover the remaining 5% - work has already begun on this
  
- *Refocus and double the funding of Community Broadband Scotland*
  - In addition to the superfast rollout, there are several alternative broadband solutions that are available to customers
  - Currently, the Scottish Government is funding a Community Broadband Scotland scheme through which communities can apply for funding to get broadband delivered through a range of alternative solutions
  - £5m was originally provided in August 2012 until March 2015, which was extended by a further £2.5m until March 2018
  - It is, however, not open to individuals, businesses or third sector organisations, in contrast with the Welsh Access Broadband Cymru scheme
  - We want to transform CBS into a Rural Broadband Fund, double the amount of its funding to £5m and refocus it so that it offers support to individuals, businesses, third sector and communities which have not yet been reached by the superfast rollout

**A LOCAL POLICE FORCE:** we back a review of the national police force to ensure it is fully accountable to rural communities.

- *Review the local accountability of our police service*
  - Recent revelations surrounding armed police and stop and search made it quite clear that there are serious issues with the accountability of the new single police force
  - We have called for a thorough review of the arrangements in place and believe this must include looking at how local accountability can be restored
  - We believe the review should, in particular, look at the possibility of a multi-layered police service, which would combine national strategic co-operation with local autonomy

**A COMMUNITY RIGHT TO BLOCK WIND FARMS:** we will back local councils who want to put a stop to new wind farms and ensure people whose property prices dropped due to farms are compensated.

- *Allow a moratorium on wind farm applications*
  - Latest figures reveal that planning authorities deal with three wind farm application a day, clogging up the planning system
  - When local councils demanded a moratorium on wind farm applications the Scottish Government said this would be an “unprecedented step in Scottish planning practice”
  - With a moratorium on shale gas exploration announced recently the precedent has now been set
  
- *Discontinue business rates exemptions for large-scale renewable projects*
  - Conservatives have committed to ending all onshore wind subsidies for projects granted planning consent after the General Election

- Scotland also operates a renewable energy relief scheme, under which renewable energy projects are entitled to a discounts on their business rates
- We would limit this to only small- and medium-scale renewable schemes with a rateable value of less than £1m
- *Introduce a compensation scheme for loss of property value due to onshore wind developments*
  - In the past we have highlighted Denmark as a country from which we could import a system of compensation for loss of property value due to onshore wind developments
  - Local residents who believe the value of their home will drop because of wind turbine developments can apply to a valuation authority which can rule the developer having to pay compensation
  - In all there are five valuation authorities covering the whole country, each consisting of a lawyer and an expert in assessing real property value in the local area.
  - The drop in value has to be estimated at over 1% and it does not apply to small turbines (under 25m tall) or offshore developments
  - If the property is located within a distance smaller than 6 times the height of the turbine there are no fees to apply – if the distance is greater the fees are waived if the claim is successful
  - As a rule claims made during the planning process, but can also be made at later stages in exceptional circumstances

**BETTER COMMUNITY TRANSPORT:** buses are a lifeline for rural communities so we will boost subsidies to boost routes.

- *Increase support for community transport schemes*
  - Community- and charity-run buses are essential to rural Scotland. For older people especially, these are often the only direct link to health care as well as friends, family or recreation

- The funding for community transport schemes is patchy and inconsistent at best, with a comprehensive national strategy absent
- We believe the National Concessionary Travel Scheme should be extended beyond commercial operators to community transport and the Scottish Government should reimburse the full value of a ticket
- As we have previously argued, it would be fairer to align the NCTS with the State Pension Age - Audit Scotland calculated this would save £40 million annually (in 2010 based on 65 SPA), some of which can be used to support community transport
- A start-up transport capital fund should also be introduced as the initial costs can be the most discouraging element when considering community transport projects
- The fund would also provide support to install ticketing machines to deal with the extension of the NCTS

**BALANCED LAND REFORM:** we will oppose moves to erode property ownership – but we also back a crackdown on tax avoidance by landowners and support funding for communities which want to lease land for the long term.

- *Increase transparency of land ownership*
  - There are elements of the Scottish Government’s land reform agenda that we support and we believe a transparent register of land ownership is in the interest of us all
  - This will help tackle tax avoidance, but it can also make it easier for communities to register their interest in community buyouts and long leases
- *Offer long lease funding for communities via the Scottish Land Fund*
  - The Scottish Land Fund currently provides financial support to communities which want to exercise the community right to buy
  - Community buyouts, however, are not the only form of land use – sometimes long leases are preferable to communities as well as landowners

- The Scottish Land Fund should be opened up to provide funding to communities interested in entering long leases
- *Fundamentally review state-owned and state-managed forestry*
  - Scottish Ministers own around 34% of the forest resource in Scotland, approximately 481,000 hectares
  - We accept that some level of state ownership is essential and beneficial in non-commercial forestry, but we see no reason why commercial timber production should be owned by the state
  - Other commercial activity (primarily tourist/recreational) forests could also be reformed, with state ownership remaining, but other community/private management models which ensure any profits are reinvested back in the asset should be trialled
  - Forest parks, as a free recreational resource, with a wide range of environmental, health and conservation benefits should be retained in public ownership

**MORE AFFORDABLE RURAL HOMES:** we back incentives for rural property owners and buyers to encourage them to provide affordable housing.

- *Introduce conditional incentives for affordable rural housing and broaden housing grant availability*
  - In rural areas especially, we have a range of empty properties that could be brought back or converted to be used as affordable housing
  - Affordable rented housing is broadly defined as mid-market or intermediate rent at lower than market rent levels
  - Fiscal and non-fiscal incentives that help rural private owners bring properties into the affordable sector would have an exponentially positive effect
  - The Scottish Government has the power to introduce conditional stamp duty exceptions for private buy-to-let investors who would have to offer affordable rents

- Rural property owners could also be incentivised through long term rent guarantee schemes, where they provide long-term (up to 10 years) affordable housing in exchange for guaranteed rent income, paid even if the property goes empty for a period of time
- Existing stock will always only be a part of the solution – we need to look at how to support community and private developers interested in affordable housing
- A bigger proportion of grant funding also has to extend beyond Registered Social Landlords (in 2010/11 this was only £5m out of £470m) to include community and private developers looking to develop new affordable housing