

A Recovery Plan for the Highlands and Islands

**Empowering and Enabling
our communities**



A Recovery Plan for the Highlands and Islands Empowering and Enabling our Communities

Scottish Labour will bring about a radical change of direction to the Highlands and Islands.

Our National Recovery Plan will focus on economic recovery and reinvigorating our public services and communities after the devastating impact of Covid-19. Healing the divisions in our country, making the Highlands and Islands a better place to live and work. As we come out of this pandemic, we must focus on solutions that will deliver a fairer recovery and a stronger Scotland. Instead of a task force on independence, Scottish Labour will task all parts of government to help the nation recover from the pandemic. We will empower communities, devolving power from Edinburgh to the people who understand our area best.

Scottish Labour MSPs will be a strong voice for the Highlands and Islands, focused on the people's priorities:

Jobs recovery:

Keeping people in work, helping people to retrain and sustaining businesses. Guaranteeing every young person a job, allowing them to stay in their community.

NHS recovery:

tackling the waiting list backlog, improving mental health and building a social care system fit for purpose.

Education recovery:

A comeback plan which invests in our schools and colleges, with IT support and a Minimum Student Income plan.



Climate recovery:

investing in green jobs and retaining them in our communities, tackling fuel poverty, and protecting our environment.

Community recovery:

investing in local areas, building houses for local people, improving transport links, and bringing decision-making back to our councils and communities. Putting more land into community ownership to help repopulate rural areas.

This is our promise to the people of the Highlands and Islands. Jobs, health, education, climate and community will always come first with Scottish Labour.



Challenges facing the Highlands and Islands

The Highlands and Islands are a unique, beautiful and valuable part of the country. It has substantial land and energy resources, which, if properly utilised, could generate sustainable growth and jobs.

We also have an outstanding natural landscape populated by active communities with a rich cultural heritage. While the SNP grandstand at Westminster and the Scottish Tories grandstand at Holyrood, both are betraying the region's priorities; only Scottish Labour prioritises jobs, health, public services, climate change and a plan for prosperity for all. However, the Highlands and Islands also have significant challenges, exacerbated by the pandemic.

The Highlands and Islands are home to less than 9% of Scotland's population yet constitute half of the landmass, including nearly 5,000km of coastline with around 100 inhabited islands. This is a mostly rural area, with 62% living in remote areas and 23% in large settlements. The largest employment sector is health and care, followed by agriculture, forestry and fishing, and tourism. SMEs dominate the business base, with most employees working for an enterprise with fewer than 50 employees. Every community across the Highlands and Islands, urban, rural, coastal or island, is unique while facing some common challenges.

Our primary employment sectors offer low wages (90% of the Scottish average) and fewer high

skilled jobs. Too many jobs are insecure, without guaranteed hours or income. That insecurity then flows through our economy, holding it back – from the stress it puts on working people to the pressure it puts on family finances. Business start-ups are lower than the rest of Scotland, although survival rates are slightly higher. There are poor public transport links, and digital connectivity could be much better. Public procurement is unfairly focused on large companies outwith the region.

We have an ageing population, strengthening our communities while also placing demands on our struggling health and social care services. Population growth has slowed, and there is a net out-migration of young people. Population projections for Highlands and Islands show a significant drop in the working-age population. Council services are stretched due to SNP cuts to our councils – passing on Tory austerity and more to our communities. The region has lost local services due to the SNP centralisation of power and services to Edinburgh. We have fragile communities in need of support and all the challenges a rural and sparsely populated area can bring.

Nearly 16,000 people are on the housing waiting lists in the Highlands and Islands. Around one-third of households are in fuel poverty, higher in rural areas due to less energy-efficient housing and weather and temperature differences – as well as relying on means other than mains gas to heat their homes. There is a damaging concentration of land ownership and wealth and insufficient protection for our natural environment and resources.

Many of the region's schools have suffered from decades of under-investment due to Council cuts and

**THERE IS A
DAMAGING
CONCENTRATION
OF LAND
OWNERSHIP AND
WEALTH AND
INSUFFICIENT
PROTECTION FOR
OUR NATURAL
ENVIRONMENT
AND RESOURCES.**

are long overdue for refurbishment or replacement. Access to further and higher education is still a challenge in some parts of the region, whether due to poor transport infrastructure or IT connectivity – 19% still have no superfast broadband access.

Brexit presents particular challenges for the Highlands and Islands, impacting small businesses, access to markets, labour availability, population attraction and retention, and the loss of EU structural funds, rural and fisheries funds. There is currently no guarantee that the replacement UK Shared Prosperity Fund will recognise geographic disparities to the same extent that EU Cohesion Policy did, enabling investment in the region's transport and IT connectivity, business support, skills, natural and cultural assets. We will support the restoration of the Highlands and Islands Partnership Programme, which the SNP scrapped to centralise decision making on structural funds in Edinburgh.

Most of these challenges existed before the pandemic and Brexit struck. However, the pandemic has highlighted these issues and disproportionately hit our economy's rural nature and the sectors we rely on. Taken together, Brexit and Covid-19 represent an even greater risk to this region than elsewhere, with 5 of the 6 Scottish local authorities most vulnerable to Brexit being located in the Highlands and Islands. It is also projected that recovery in this region will take longer than in the rest of Scotland.

Scottish Labour's manifesto for these elections will set out a National Recovery Plan for Scotland. A range of measures will help the Highlands and Islands recover from the pandemic's impact.



Jobs Recovery

We must ensure the local economy can weather the storm of coronavirus by ensuring the Scottish Government, businesses and trade unions work together to develop a plan to rebuild and grow a sustainable economy, with green recovery and a just transition at its heart.

Business confidence in the Highlands and Islands' economic outlook was understandably lower than this time last year, but this continues the downward trend seen over the past three years. Doing more of the same is not good enough. We will restore the budget and powers of Highlands and Islands Enterprise to make an effective difference, in the spirit of the old Highland and Islands Development Board, one of Labour's historic achievements.

Scottish Labour will build community wealth that stays local, working together for the common good. Small and medium-sized businesses are the lifeblood of the local economy. They have demonstrated tremendous flexibility in supporting communities during the pandemic. We must ensure they are supported to help the economy recover and adapt to the new situation post-Brexit. Scottish Labour's Business Restart Fund will give businesses the support and investment they need and ensure public procurement is used to support local enterprise. The Highlands and Islands have a robust social enterprise base to build on with some 1,200 enterprises, 21%



We need to help people back to work, support local businesses and raise employment standards. That's why I'll be voting for Scottish Labour's National Recovery Plan.

Catherine, Lewis

of the Scottish total. Scottish Labour will support a range of alternative business models, including co-operatives, and build on the successful community land ownership models.

Town centres are crucial hubs in our communities. Scottish Labour's approach to our high streets and town centres will be based on a clear vision that allows communities to build locally based on individual strengths. This requires effective local partnerships between business, trade unions, and the local authority to develop a long-term plan with measurable objectives, which are adequately funded. There have been numerous bank closures across the region, and we will seek a commitment from banks that they will not close 'the last branch in town'. We will campaign to end unfair delivery charges for Highlands and Islands to help consumers and end the rip off of hidden surcharges

The Tourism industry is essential to the Highlands and Islands economy with 2.7 million overnight visitors, 14.6 million day visitors and accounts for 10% of jobs in the region before the pandemic. The industry was growing before the pandemic, and Scottish Labour will do everything it can to safeguard businesses, jobs and secure a vibrant future for this sector. This includes the Great Scottish Staycation 2021, which would offer a '3rd Night Free' Scottish Government funded subsidy of holiday accommodation. Public investment will also require improvement in the quality of jobs by raising employment standards, providing training opportunities, and strengthening the quality of life, particularly in rural areas.

Scottish Labour's Good Work Plan will not merely encourage good work and extend collective

bargaining but will require compliance. It will help build an economy that supports better wages and more secure employment, greater redistribution of the wealth generated and a stronger social contract. We will retain and strengthen the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board. Flexible working options such as home working could create new opportunities in the Highlands and Islands. They are a practical solution for more organisations and better for the environment and wellbeing of workers.

The Highlands and Islands public transport system is a patchwork of services, with many areas left behind with inadequate provision. We will bring all our railways back into common ownership and create faster rail links with the central belt and the north-east with earlier start times. We will enable our bus services to go back into public hands with start-up resources for councils to run them as a public service that we will all benefit from. We will extend free bus travel to under 25s, with a goal of universal free bus travel. We will champion community shared transport with sustainable funding that prioritises decarbonisation.

In our towns, we aim to create neighbourhoods where people can access all the services they need within a 20-minute walk through investment in active travel. There will need to be an expansion of public charging points for electric vehicles to recognise the greater reliance on private cars in rural areas and the longer distances that often need to be travelled. We will support interest free loans to help more low and middle-income households make the transition. Key

THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM IS A PATCHWORK OF SERVICES, WITH MANY AREAS LEFT BEHIND WITH INADEQUATE PROVISION.

arterial road routes fail to meet trunk road standards, and funding levels do not recognise the maintenance needs of local roads and the significant routes they serve in our region. There should be more space for cycles on rural and island bus services and on the rail network – to make cycling a part of everyday journeys and days out and reduce car dependency. Local travel hubs in rural communities would connect shared transport, cycle hire, e-bike charging, safe walking routes, and transport information. We will support the Skye Cycle Network Project to develop a network on the islands and an ambition to link it with the Fort William to Inverness route in the future to boost tourism and active travel opportunities in the region.

Labour supports Scotland’s lifeline ferries, such as CalMac, and wants all these services delivered as a public service with proper investment in a new fleet of ships fit for the future. Services to islands like Islay are inadequate and hold back economic development, as are the ferry costs for commercial vehicles. We will continue to oppose the dangerous and expensive centralisation of air traffic control services at Highlands and Islands airports. The ink was barely dry on the Islands Act assessment requirements before the SNP government ignored island authorities’ views.

Scottish Labour will end the creeping privatisation of water and wastewater services, which has centralised services and undermined local suppliers. We will end the market systems and replace it with a Scottish Water Plan driven by citizens’ views.



NHS Recovery

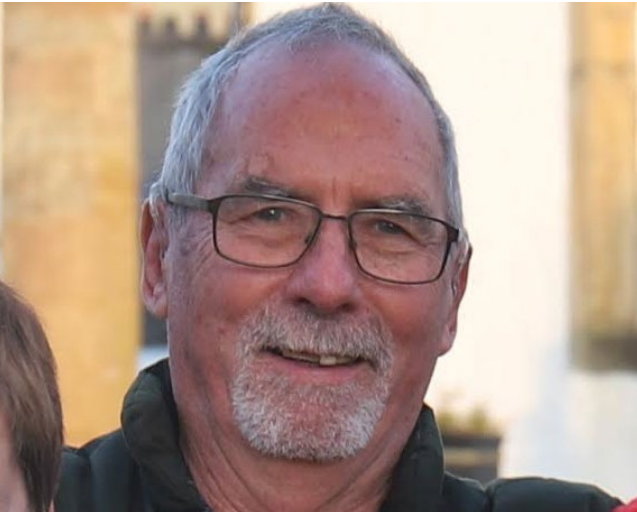
The pandemic has reinforced the importance of our health and care systems and those who deliver them.

The Highlands and Islands face the twin challenges of recovering from the very immediate crisis created by Covid-19, but also recovering our NHS from a decade of mounting problems.

Scottish Labour will restart our NHS after the pandemic by investing in the facilities and staff needed to tackle the backlog and strengthen services for the longer term. We recognise the challenges of recruiting and retaining health and care staff in rural areas and support the development of additional training facilities in the region. We support the Scottish Rural Health Partnership calls for more evidence-based research and will rural proof all health service reforms. We agree that the appointment of a Rural Health Commissioner would improve accountability. Exciting innovations in rural health care, using technology to overcome geographical barriers, have become even more relevant due to Covid-19 restrictions. Further development and utilisation of these will be crucial in health care provision in the Highlands and Islands in the future.

The growing mental health crisis requires better NHS services and preventive action by ending austerity, poverty, and earlier intervention. NHS services also require investment, particularly for dementia, children

and young people who are waiting too long for treatment. Scotland still has the highest rate of suicide in the UK, and the number of deaths in Highland is the highest since 1982. More needs to be done to support suicide prevention programmes focusing on high suicide rates in rural areas. Twenty-one farmers



“It is shocking that suicide rates in the Highlands and Islands are the highest since 1982. We need much greater investment in rural mental health services.”

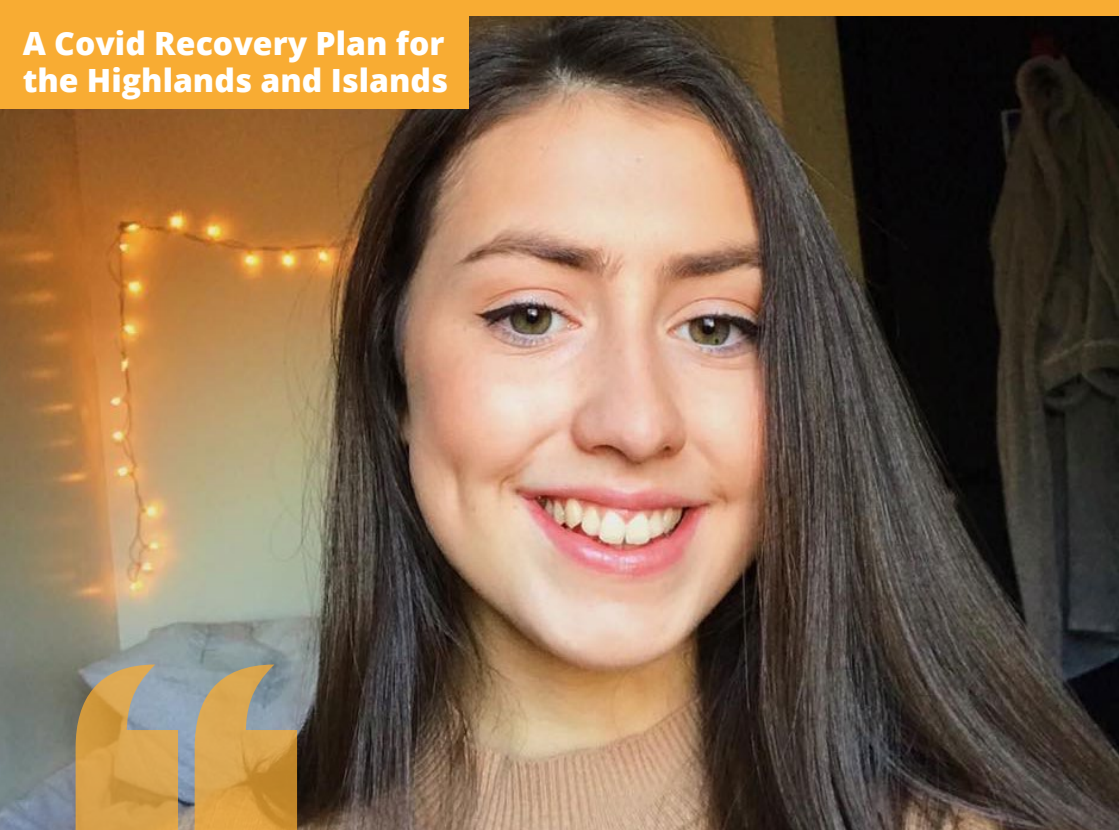
Bob, Loch Fyne

in Scotland took their lives in 2019, which shows the woefully inadequate levels of support available to farmers struggling with mental health issues. Avoidable deaths are also particularly high in the Western Isles. We recognise the need to develop more robust mental wellbeing precrisis support, working with the voluntary sector in remote rural areas.

More than any other service, the pandemic has highlighted the crisis in social care. We will create a National Care Service to promote greater consistency in care and raise minimum standards. The proper funding of care will become a national priority, while the design and delivery of care remains informed by local expertise, accountability, and community input. Scottish Labour will introduce a new minimum wage for care workers of £12, rising to £15 per hour and raise employment standards across the sector. We will introduce a comprehensive support strategy for unpaid carers, including increased investment and entitlement to short breaks, access to leisure and wellbeing services, occupational health support and the provision of independent advocacy for carers of all ages.

Scottish Labour aims to eliminate the persistent scourge of inequalities across the Highlands and Islands by investing in services that determine our health. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the social security safety net, with many more people relying on the system. Poverty is both a symptom and a cause of ill-health. Scottish Labour will focus on the social security system’s ability to respond and support people’s health and reinforce the safety net. In particular, we will seek to end child poverty by doubling the Scottish Child Payment to £20 per week.

WE SUPPORT THE SCOTTISH RURAL HEALTH PARTNERSHIP CALLS FOR MORE EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH AND WILL RURAL PROOF ALL HEALTH SERVICE REFORMS.



**A Minimum Student Income plan
will be a massive help with the
additional costs young people
studying at university and
colleges have in rural areas.**

Katie, Inverness

Education Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted most parts of the education system. Scottish Labour has set out a comeback plan to mitigate the attainment gap widened by the shutdown.

This includes personal tutoring programmes and a Personal Comeback Plan for every pupil. We will deliver a strategic skills plan for the region to develop the skills needed for future jobs.

Scottish Labour supports a flexible, all-age, all-year, wrap-around affordable early years service centred on the child's needs. Studies have shown that a later start to formal education better prepares children for adolescence and adulthood. Therefore, we would move towards a more blended provision from Early Learning to formal schooling from the age of 6 or 7 while retaining the current compulsory starting age in public sector provision. We should recognise the challenges faced in accessing childcare and support in rural communities and overcome them.

Our schools have fewer teachers and support staff, which has implications for educational experience quality. The figures show attainment falling and the attainment gap widening, not narrowing. Our Comeback plan will enhance digital training for staff with digital devices available to all pupils. We will support the continuation of residential outdoor

education centres. This opportunity should be available to every child.

Scottish Labour will reinvest in Further Education and give it equality of status with other education routes. This includes studying part-time, distance learning, and those with additional support needs and those living in rural areas. Developing the skills that are needed in the local labour market. Our Minimum Student Income Plan will support full-time students, recognising the cost of living is greater for students from rural areas who cannot live at home. The new Scottish Skills Benefit will offer everyone who is unemployed, along with those currently on furlough, a £500 grant for retraining. We will strengthen local delivery to improve rural areas' access. We will reform the apprenticeship system to provide quality training opportunities.

Scottish Labour recognises the role of the University of the Highlands and Islands and its distinctive tertiary, blended delivery model, with progression routes across further and higher education, as well as into work-based education. This has been particularly important during the pandemic, offering wider access for learners through digital delivery while providing personalised local support. We will continue to support and invest in this kind of delivery, targeting skills and training needs for Covid-19 recovery and increasing research capacity targeted at the region's priority sectors.

Scottish Labour will reinvest in community learning and development to support democratic engagement. We will ensure Youth Work is funded to ensure all young people have the personal

**AS A CRITICAL
COMPARATOR,
THE WELSH
LANGUAGE
ENJOYS GREATER
PROTECTION AND
SIGNIFICANTLY
MORE
GOVERNMENT
INVESTMENT**

development support they need to succeed in education, training and employment. All our education commitments will help enable those young people who choose to stay in the communities in which they grew up.

Gaelic language and culture are critical aspects of Scotland's national heritage and identity. They attract international interest and are a highly significant economic generator for the West Highlands and Islands. Scottish Labour has a proud record of support for the language and introduced the 2005 Gaelic Language Act and Bòrd na Gàidhlig. Despite the notable successes achieved over recent years in the delivery of Gaelic Medium Education at the Primary School level, much more must be done to address the continuing problem of the lack of Gaelic Medium education in Secondary Schools nationally.

Very little progress has been made in recent years in addressing the decline of the language in its remaining heartlands. Labour will work with Bòrd na Gàidhlig and the Local Authorities to revitalise the Gaelic development strategy, emphasising its importance to the socio-economic regeneration of native Gaelic speaking communities. Scottish Labour will also maintain our history of support for Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the National Centre for the Gaelic Language and Culture. As a critical comparator, the Welsh language enjoys greater protection and significantly more government investment in terms of Welsh language, culture and the arts and Welsh TV channel, S4C. The challenge is to make Gaelic not only the language of the classroom but the language of the playground, at home and through social media.



Climate Recovery

We will support creating new skilled green jobs across the region as part of our Green New Deal plans.

These will include housebuilding, retrofitting homes, peatland restoration, tree planting, community food growing and more – all in the context of climate and nature emergencies. Scottish Labour will invest in coastal protections and better flood management. We will prioritise the development of full-fibre broadband and 4G/5G extensions to underpin rural small businesses’ future success. Unlike the SNP, Scottish Labour will negotiate for a settlement of post-Brexit funding, which will address the economic and social needs of the Highlands and Islands, rather than turning the Shared Prosperity Fund into another casualty of the constitutional wrangling between Holyrood and Westminster.

The Highlands and Islands have played an essential role in developing renewable energy, helping meet our climate change targets. However, the economic benefits have not been retained in our communities and households in the Highlands pay around £400 a year extra for electricity. We will create a Renewable Supply Office in the Highlands, based on the successful model of the offshore supply office, to ensure that every contract delivers a minimum share of work to local suppliers, including incorporating

this into licensing and funding processes. We would only approve new offshore windfarms when a plan for supply chain manufacturing was in place, and conditions on job creation in Scotland were met. The SNP has failed to deliver the benefits of renewable energy in terms of local jobs – that scandal must end. We support the establishment of hydrogen hubs in the Highlands and Islands as part of a plan to strengthen our ports, including the ambitious plans for Orkney and the Cromarty Firth. There are similar opportunities to develop an engineering hub at Dounreay and through the spaceport bids.

Labour will provide new investment in energy efficiency, including a commitment to eradicating fuel poverty by 2032, with stricter interim targets, which will deliver emissions reductions, jobs and potential opportunities in the supply chain. A new definition of fuel poverty will include an uplift for rural communities. We support a rural homes just transition package for homeowners, landlords and the supply chain in off-gas areas.

A healthy environment is a basic right that we are all entitled to and should defend. This includes introducing carbon impact assessments into all policy processes. We will also develop a coherent Biodiversity Action Plan for post-2020 for land, air and sea, with adequate funding. There will be a plan for ocean recovery, where at least 30% of Scotland’s seas are highly protected by 2030 and protect sustainable coastal fisheries.

THE SNP HAS FAILED TO DELIVER THE BENEFITS OF RENEWABLE ENERGY IN TERMS OF LOCAL JOBS – THAT SCANDAL MUST END.





Community Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of communities, which have responded magnificently to the crisis.

This local coming together has been a vital support to many during the pandemic. As we recover, we need to ensure that those at risk are protected, and we have a sustainable strategy for the local economy.

Councils in the Highlands and Islands deliver public services differently, which should be reflected in funding allocation mechanisms. We will introduce a 'rural proofing process so that all our laws, policies and programmes consider their impact on rural communities. Scottish Labour supports the principle of subsidiarity – allocating functions at the lowest possible practical level. We will rebuild communities devastated by austerity by developing a universal basic services framework – strengthening the social infrastructure that minimises social isolation and builds stronger communities.

The creation of national police and fire services has led to a centralisation of power. Scottish Labour will place local accountability at the heart of modern, responsive services with a statutory role for local government in local policing plans and budgetary allocations. This includes halting the closure of courts and ensuring justice is delivered as locally as possible. We will ensure that the principle of



I agree that renewable energy is vital for tackling the climate emergency. But it must come with a commitment to creating local jobs and real community benefits.

Margaret, Ross-shire



WE WILL SUPPORT MEASURES TO LIMIT THE NUMBER OF SECOND HOMES WITH LOCAL LIMITS SET IN CONSULTATION WITH COMMUNITIES.

partnership working across key agencies – including Highlands and Islands Enterprise, local Councils, NHS, University of the Highlands and Islands and others – is encouraged and empowered to be responsive to the specific needs of the region.

A key Labour ambition will be to build 120,000 zero-carbon social homes over ten years in Scotland and establish the crucial link between rents and people’s ability to afford them. We aim to deliver more social housing in rural areas through a more flexible grant that recognises the increased costs of smaller development. We will support measures to limit the number of second homes with local limits set in consultation with communities. The pandemic has heightened demand for second homes and home-working, and the market is forcing out families on low or average incomes. Scottish Labour will immediately review how land use and, where appropriate, crofting tenure can be linked creatively and effectively to housing needs. It is crucial to recognise that these areas face a continuing decline without active people to provide services.

Labour will provide new investment in energy efficiency, including a commitment to eradicating fuel poverty by 2032. There will be stricter interim targets, which will deliver emissions reductions and jobs in the supply chain. A new definition of fuel poverty will include an uplift for rural communities. We support a rural homes just transition package for homeowners, landlords and the supply chain in off-gas areas.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of a strong voluntary sector in tackling social justice. We will develop the LEADER programme to increase support to local rural community and business networks. Our vision for civil society sits alongside our plans to decentralise powers and democratise the economy. A fairer Scotland where we care about each other, where people can pool their resources, demand accountability, build institutions and influence the decisions that affect them.

Our Good Food Nation plan will support rural communities, encourage local food production and reform agricultural support on the public support for the public good principle. We will ensure that future agricultural payments support sustainable, integrated land use and strengthen rural communities. Farmers and crofters need clarity on what they can expect in the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement and beyond as a new agriculture support system is developed to help tackle the climate crisis. We will work with crofters to guide our support for crofting and the need for fit for purpose crofting legislation. A right to food will begin to address the scandal of food poverty in our communities.

Scottish Labour will support the comprehensive licensing of grouse moors as soon as possible and

**SCOTTISH LABOUR
WILL ENSURE
MORE LAND IS IN
THE HANDS OF THE
MANY TO HELP
CREATE A FAIRER
SUSTAINABLE
SCOTLAND.**

promote our uplands’ sustainable development, including deer management, in everyone’s interests. Woodlands have a key role in tackling climate change but also have wider environmental and social benefits. At least 50% of all woodland expansion should be with native species and at least 10% delivered through natural regeneration. We will designate more National Parks and support developing plans to establish National Parks in Harris, Wester Ross, Glen Affric, Glencoe and the Coastal and Marine National Park, which have the support of local people.

The Highlands and Islands is home to 97% of Scotland’s community-owned land thanks to Labour policies in government. Scottish Labour will ensure more land is in the hands of the many to help create a fairer sustainable Scotland. We will legislate to ensure that no one individual can acquire large swathes of Scotland’s land and prevent land ownership via offshore tax-havens. We will increase funding for the Scottish Land Fund, using the revenue from seabed licensing, and intervening when land is not used in ways that serve the public interest. Public sector agencies should be enabled to participate in land markets with the aim of transferring the land into local vehicles of sustainable local ownership as a basis for local wealth building

and income retention. This will empower local communities and repopulate our rural places to help them thrive.

Scottish Labour believes sport must be run in the interests of those who participate in it and love it, not just for a privileged few. We will develop a new Active Scotland Plan, enabling councils to reintegrate local services – tackling high access charges and crumbling maintenance budgets. A thriving culture sector, together with a properly-resourced and independent media sector, is a necessary prerequisite for democracy to flourish and allow people to develop and fulfil their creative potential. The pandemic will impact the creative industries for many years. We will ensure that support structures are put in place to ensure the survival of theatres, creative organisations and the protection of jobs. We will also protect and develop the essential cultural, social infrastructure in our communities.



