

2024 Westminster Election - Manifesto

Reserved powers

It is useful to begin with a reminder of the reserved powers which are relevant to the work of SLE. While many of the key elements are now devolved, there are some crucial elements which are not.

• currency • data protection • defence and national security • equality legislation (most aspects) • energy (most aspects) • budgets (agriculture and block grant)	• employment law and industrial relations • immigration, asylum and visas • taxation (some aspects) • telecommunications • trade and industry • climate change/green economy (some aspects)
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Content

A short list of our policy priorities for the next UK Government, focussed on reserved powers.

Rural Proofing

It is our ongoing ask of every government to ensure that policies are designed with the countryside in mind. Rural proofing should be a standard component of the development of policies across all departments of the UK Government. Understanding the impact of policy and legislation on rural areas is absolutely fundamental to addressing the inequalities that are faced by people living and working in rural areas. This can be achieved through the creation of a dedicated team within the government that undertakes a 'rural impact assesment' of all policy and legislation that is developed. We would like to see a commitment to this in every party's manifestos in the upcoming election.

Taxation

Parity for non-corporate businesses

A number of reliefs or exemptions are intended to benefit "businesses" such as R & D relief or capital allowances, but these exclude non corporate entities such as trusts or partnerships. This disproportionately discriminates against rural businesses where there is a

high proportion of family partnerships and trust arrangements owning and managing businesses. We ask that where the policy intention is to benefit businesses, non-corporates should be included.

VAT and energy saving materials

To facilitate the decarbonisation of owned and rented residential property we ask that the zero-rate of VAT on energy-saving materials be extended to the purchase of the materials as well as the installation. The current regime fails to recognise those owners of homes who carry out the installation of energy saving materials in-house. This is common on rural estates where an in-house maintenance resource is common and can more cost effectively carry out works themselves rather than employ external contractors.

Food & Farming

Funding

While implementation of Agricultural Policy is devolved, the budget is led by UK government and is not part of the Barnett formula. While UK government will point to the current settlement and the ability of Scottish Government to set its own budget for agriculture using existing funds. A longer-term view for agriculture, including future funding would help both with planning and confidence for all involved. UK government also has the ability to ring fence funding for rural support and agriculture. The 2019 Bew Review provided a clear set of recommendations for intra-uk allocation of funding until 2023 to address historical issues of allocation and handle the fair distribution of convergence funding. This review also highlighted the importance of transparency in the development of future funding allocation for UK agriculture budget.

In the context of the new Agriculture Bill in Scotland, it will be more important than ever to have a commitment from the UK Government to provide a transparent, multi-annual funding settlement to ensure farmers can farm for the future, knowing the level of funding they can expect to receive. This will also require the Scottish Government to map out how this funding will be allocated, but it will start with the commitment to funding coming from the UK Government. We believe that the benefits Scotland's farmers are bringing to the UK, including food security, emissions reductions and other climate mitigation measures, nature restoration, and involvement in emerging natural capital markets, the agricultural funding package should be increased over the next parliament.

Trade

This is an ongoing ask of UK government to make sure that both current and future trade deals work for UK food producers. Too often it has felt like an afterthought with the deal itself being the prize rather than the right deal. Valuing the food and drink industry in the UK more strongly would be a huge step forward. The commitment from the current government to focus on food security offers an opportunity for this to be expected of the future government. To date UK food security meetings have failed to adequately include devolved nations, this must be corrected in the future. The Windsor Framework has thrown up anomalies around the live export of animals which have inadvertently placed Scottish livestock farmers at a

disadvantage, exacerbated by the dwindling number of abattoirs in Scotland for processing. The UK Government should also consider revising the regulations around establishing new mobile abattoirs to help alleviate the problems around competition with European markets that have arisen as a result of the Windsor Framework.

Immigration

More support is needed to ensure the labour required to support rural businesses can continue to enter the country. While we do not expect an “open door” policy, one which understands the needs of business and smooths the passage for workers who are needed, and at the time they are needed would be hugely beneficial to productivity in the UK and help to boost rural economies. The next UK Government should consider supporting a Rural Visa Pilot scheme to ensure that rural businesses can attract the employees it needs for a sustainable future.

ECHR – commitment to property rights

The next UK government should re-affirm its support for the European Convention for Human Rights. We are particularly concerned about recent legislative developments in Scotland which may infringe on the protection of property rights. There seems to be a general movement to erode human rights, particularly for businesses and this is creating uncertainty and slowing investment into the UK. As the Scottish Government is looking at a separate Human Rights bill, it is vital that UK government is unwavering in its support for ECHR.

Shared Rural Network

SLE is hugely supportive of the UK Government’s Shared Rural Network project that is helping to bridge the divide in connectivity between urban and rural areas. However, we are concerned that the arbitrary target of 95% coverage is leading to extremely remote sites being selected for large and costly infrastructure projects that could be potentially harmful to the environment in which they are being built with little or no demonstratable benefits for rural communities. The next UK Government must understand the landscape in which these sites are being selected and ensure that the significant costs associated with these projects are not spent on providing the odd stag or ground nesting bird with access to 5G simply to meet the arbitrary 95% coverage target. Targets should instead focus on people and communities, rather than land mass, particularly in remote locations in Scotland. We would like to see any savings made by revisions to the roll out of the SRN based on these proposals spent on priorities identified by rural communities in Scotland.