



Common sense

for the Highlands and Islands

Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
April 2026

Scottish
Conservative
& Unionist



Common sense
for a change



OUR RECORD

STANDING UP FOR THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

- » Scottish Conservatives have pushed for stronger transport links across the Highlands and Islands, and held this failing SNP Government to account for its failures to dual the A9 and the A96.
- » Conservatives in Government have delivered city and growth deals bringing real investment to our region, including the Inverness and Highlands City Deal, the Moray Growth Deal, the Argyll Growth Deal and the Islands Deal.
- » We have delivered a green freeport on the Cromarty Firth, bringing millions of pounds worth of investment to the region.
- » We have challenged the SNP on the ferry crisis it has created, calling for an honest ferry strategy that is transparent on the needs and costs for new vessels and infrastructure.
- » We have backed our rural economy and supported our farmers and fishermen, including those hit by Labour's family farms tax and those impacted by the SNP's shambolic roll-out of the Future Farming Investment Scheme.
- » We have stood up for the interests of rural areas, including blocking the SNP's attempt to ban wood burning stoves - even in rural and off-grid homes.
- » We have opposed the industrialisation of the Highlands and Islands, helping communities and local volunteers fight plans for damaging energy infrastructure cutting through their areas.
- » We have pushed for respect for our island communities, including calling for greater use of powers under the Islands Act and establishing the first Scottish Parliament Cross-Party Group on Islands.

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for a change 



Foreword

Jamie Halcro Johnston | Candidate for Orkney

It has become increasingly clear that the needs of the Highlands and Islands are being poorly met by an SNP Government in Edinburgh, that lacks drive and ambition for our region.

Common Sense for the Highlands and Islands looks at what the Scottish Conservatives would do differently across the region – and tackles the long-term challenges that the Highlands and Islands face head-on.

Scotland needs a government that works for the whole of Scotland. One that moves away from an entrenched central belt bias, where Glasgow and Edinburgh are seen as our only economic powerhouses.

Instead, we want to see the incredible potential of our region unlocked – and for a future Scottish Government to be a leading partner in that process.

Many of these proposals are based on a series of policy discussions in the autumn and winter of 2025/26, involving Scottish Conservative members and supporters from across all areas of the Highlands and Islands. They have been further

developed over the last few months from what we have heard from members of the public as we campaign in communities across the region.

The challenges this plan highlights are not straightforward, nor are the answers always easy. They aim to reflect some of the diversity of our region, from the coastal communities of Moray, to the rural Highlands, the urban centre of Inverness and the many island communities.

A vote for the Scottish Conservatives in the Highlands and Islands is a vote for delivering real, common sense change.



Jamie Halcro Johnston
Scottish Conservative candidate for Orkney

A Connected Highlands and Islands



The Highlands and Islands have always faced challenges with connectivity – whether by roads or ferries, or by digital means. This has been a real barrier to economic growth and has held the region back. We recognise that not every investment can be made, but it is vital that any future Scottish Government makes progress on the priorities of the region if the Highlands and Islands are to come close to realising their potential.

ROADS

We recognise that the quality of our roads across the region has deteriorated to the extent that some rural roads are next to unusable. This not only has an impact on road users, but also the wider economy. **Scottish Conservatives will work with councils to improve the state of roads across the Highlands and Islands and implement a new Pothole Action Fund, which will support investment in local roads - and will also provide help for the capital costs of new kerb-to-kerb resurfacing equipment - so short-term fixes don't become long-term problems.**

The SNP have completely failed to meet their promises to the people of the Highlands and Islands to dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness, and the A96. Local communities want certainty and a credible timeline for improvements – but above all, to get on with the work. **We will provide an absolute commitment to dualling the A9 and the A96 – no more delays, no more broken promises – and will legislate to ensure that public bodies have the powers they need to deliver at pace, with a target of completing A9 dualling between Perth and Inverness by the end of the next Scottish Parliament session.**

In Argyll and Bute, the A83 Rest and Be Thankful has long been an economic bottleneck, impacting local business, the visitor economy and residents alike. There is no real alternative route, and its continued closures have an enormous impact on local people and the economy. **We would bring forward a feasibility study of a new bypass route for the A83 and any other practical alternatives to ensure that the road is kept open for business. We will also consider where other roads, such as**

the A82, should be considered for upgrades to improve safety and access to the region.

Blanket assumptions around reduced speed limits have caused frustration in local communities, where new speed limits – particularly large areas being reclassified as 20mph zones – have been imposed with minimal consultation. **We will ensure a route for communities to challenge reduced speed limits that have been put in place in their areas and ensure that these limits are only put in place where the community supports them.**

In many areas, buses are the only form of public transport available - but due to SNP underfunding, councils are often unable to support local routes. **We will open a new Small Town and Rural Bus Fund to help keep routes open where they are under threat.**

RAIL



Our railways are an asset to the region – but too often, they are a slow option, poorly integrated with other public transport, and expensive for passengers. The Highland Main Line in particular is a vital arterial route that should be at the centre of rail improvement in the region. **We will commission a study into the potential for greater integration of public transport in the region and commit to continuing with work to dual and upgrade the Highland Main Line over the next ten years.**

Many communities are bypassed by rail lines that do not serve them. Meanwhile low-cost modular stations have demonstrated the potential for reopening former stations and building new ones on existing lines. **We will review local rail connections and deliver new stations where it can help to promote economic growth and support local communities.**

FERRIES AND FIXED LINKS



The problems with Scotland's ferry network have become a national crisis that has hit communities hard right across our region. Ferry routes suffer where an ageing and increasingly unreliable fleet leads to vessels being taken off routes for long periods, while future investment is uncertain. **We will provide a clear, long-term strategy for investment in the ferry fleets across Scotland and be open and honest about when new vessels will be needed. New procurement will target reducing the average age of the fleet to 14 years and aimed at delivering a minimum of three new vessels every two years. We will merge CalMac and CMAL, saving money for taxpayers.**

Local authority run services like those in Orkney and Shetland have had to fight for even the most fundamental equality in funding each year, with little clarity over what support will be forthcoming for vessel replacements. Meanwhile connections like the Highland Council run Corran ferry have been undermined with long waits for alternative fuelled vessels. **We will work with councils to ensure that local authority ferry services are fairly resourced and form part of the long-term ferry investment strategy. We will also expedite the delivery of a new vessel for the Corran Narrows Crossing, while working with the local community on the future feasibility of a fixed link across the Narrows.**

Northlink's overnight services are an essential part of connecting the Northern Isles to mainland Scotland. Often, however, facilities are oversubscribed and unavailable. **We would seek to reintroduce shared cabins on Northlink services**

where it provides a suitable alternative for passengers.

Communities both on the islands and in more remote parts of the mainland recognise that bridges, tunnels and other fixed links can offer a potential replacement to existing ferry services, help to bridge significant geographical divides and grow local economies. **Working with local councils and communities, we will be bold in exploring where new fixed links can work as a sustainable, long-term investment – with a like-for-like cost comparison to operating ferry services into the future.**

AIRPORTS & AIR LINKS

There is real potential for improved air links to boost connectivity for the region. **We will explore options for improved local services within the region and promote better air links to other parts of the UK and beyond.**

From April 2027, Air Passenger Duty will be replaced with a new devolved Air Departure Tax. **We will look to reduce tax on air travel to attract investment, while maintaining the Highlands and Islands exemption in the new Air Passenger Tax.**

The region's airports and air links must be seen to work for all of us. Uniquely, many of our region's airports are publicly owned and operated through Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. **We will direct HIAL to review their parking charges at airports with a view to making our region's airports as accessible as possible.**

MOBILE & BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY

Our digital infrastructure is making an incredible difference to communities across the Highlands and Islands and opening remote and rural communities up to economic opportunities. However the region still struggles with some of the slowest broadband speeds in the UK and a large proportion of the country's mobile "not spots", with relatively slow speeds over the cellular network. **We will complete the long-overdue rollout of the R100 programme and guarantee households across Scotland benefit from fibre roll-out, and promote genuinely flexible alternatives where normal broadband cannot be delivered.**

Delivering Your Public Services



Delivering public services across the Highlands and Islands can come with challenges, but it is part of any Scottish Government's duty to ensure that Scotland's regions are not disadvantaged with poorer access to education, healthcare and the services people rely on.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT



It is important that local government can be genuinely local in serving the people of the Highlands and Islands. The size of the Highland Council area has been an impediment to genuine local democracy, with proceedings in Inverness being distant and remote to many. **Highlands and Islands Conservative MSPs, working with local colleagues, will explore the possibility of breaking up the Highland Council area into a number of smaller local authorities, while retaining some Highland-level bodies to coordinate collaborative working arrangements.**

The SNP has used cuts to local authority core budgets to push responsibility for service cuts and tax rises onto councils and away from the Scottish Government. While the SNP has funded its pet projects, council services have been cut to the bone with years of underinvestment. **We will look to provide a fair deal for councils across the region and review local authority funding allocations to ensure that rural councils are being given fair funding that reflects the increased costs they face in delivering services. We will also put in place a Local Power Bill, giving councils more discretion over their budgets and providing the security of guaranteed multi-year funding.**

For too long, councils have been overruled and undermined on local issues. **We will restore local**

democracy and end the practice of Scottish Ministers overturning local decisions.

EDUCATION & YOUNG PEOPLE

Our young people deserve great facilities in which to learn. The schools estate remains an issue across the region, with concerns that investment is not best targeted and that new buildings are not necessarily appropriate to the needs of local communities. **We will review plans for updating the school estate, with an emphasis on appropriateness, design and quality of new buildings and improvements.**

It is essential that schools reflect the needs of pupils and provide a personalised approach to education for all, an approach too often absent in rural and island schools across the Highlands and Islands. **We will scrap the Curriculum for Excellence and replace it with a Curriculum for Aspiration putting knowledge acquisition at its core. We will also overhaul support for children with additional support needs - with 1,000 additional classroom assistants across Scotland and a national review of mainstreaming.**

Too many teachers are unable to find permanent jobs and forced into fixed-term or part-time contracts because of local authorities being unable to guarantee budgets. **We will work with councils to support teacher recruitment in local schools and to ensure teachers can have secure employment in our region, as part of a Scotland-wide workforce plan.**

It is important that young people have the opportunity to learn vocational skills and obtain qualifications in their own communities, and that opportunities are available to them within the region. **We will reverse cuts to further education, and introduce a new Skills Bill building on cooperation between business and local employers. We will work with local authorities to ensure that foundation apprenticeships in schools are enhanced and ensure that local college provision is protected across the region.**

Funded childcare has been a success in allowing parents to return to work and avoid breaks in their

careers. However options can be limited, particularly in rural areas. **We will increase choice in funded childcare and expand provision to children from nine months onward where their parents are in work. We will support work to ensure the "partner rate" for those delivering supported childcare remains sustainable and reflects local needs.**

HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE

The Highlands and Islands has a proud history of delivering medical care to its people and taking on the challenges of our region's geography. It is in our region that the Highlands and Islands Medical Service was created, providing a blueprint for the NHS as it was rolled out across the UK. However the last five years has seen services decimated by centralisation and cost-saving, with key provision – like maternity services – downgraded in many hospitals around the region. **We will ensure that the NHS is kept local and that vital services are delivered close to where people live. We will oppose the closure of any local health facility or community hospital over the lifetime of the next Scottish Parliament. Where waiting times are excessive - as with knee and hip replacement operations - we will take targeted action to increase capacity, including using private providers and capacity in other parts of the UK if necessary.**

We recognise the different challenges that health boards have in operating in remote and rural areas – and the vast distances that patients often need to travel to access healthcare. In rural areas, we have an even greater reliance on primary care like our local GPs. **We will explore the introduction of a specific rural funding formula to ensure that the NHS can provide first-class healthcare across all parts of Scotland. We will double the proportion of the NHS budget dedicated to general practice - introducing a 48-hour appointment guarantee.**

The Belford Hospital in Fort William is no longer fit for purpose, and it has been a decade since a site was purchased for its replacement. **We will get the New Belford built at pace and delivering vital services to the local community.**

Around the region, the centralisation of maternity services has meant pregnant women travelling often very long distances to give birth in Inverness rather than in local hospitals where units have been downgraded. **We will protect local maternity services across the Highlands and Islands, particularly in Caithness and Moray.**

Scotland's NHS dental services have been in a state of crisis since the Covid pandemic. In the Highlands and Islands, where there is limited choice in practices, these problems are even more acute. Last

year, fewer than one in three Highland dental practices were accepting new NHS patients – while across Scotland, one in five people cannot access NHS dental care at all. For many, there has been little alternative but to seek private treatment and shoulder the additional cost. **We will ensure that NHS dental care is protected and resourced for the future.**

Delivering a sustainable, personalised social care system that reflects the needs of individuals across Scotland will be a major task for any future government. With the geography of the Highlands and Islands creating particular challenges, the delivery of home-based social care comes with an extra degree of difficulty. **We will work with local councils to ensure that the Highlands and Islands are fairly supported to deliver social care and will carry out a review of the structure of integration joint boards to ensure they are delivering for communities. We will reduce bed blocking by supporting the NHS to move patients into care placements while a long-term care package is being finalised.**

POLICING, FIRE & JUSTICE

Like other public services, centralisation has damaged the link between communities and policing in the Highlands and Islands. **We will aim to improve links between Police Scotland and local communities in the region as part of a wider programme of protecting police budgets and putting more officers on the street. We will prevent the closure of any operational police station for the next Holyrood term.**

Rural crime has increased in recent years. Thefts of high-value agricultural equipment have become commonplace – and farmers are suffering significant disruption to their businesses. **We will bring forward a Rural Theft Bill, requiring forensic markers on vehicles and equipment and supporting the installation of immobilisers on farm equipment, while investing in improved local policing.**

Damage caused by wildfires has become a considerable problem in areas across the Highlands and Islands. Communities are concerned that the SNP Government has left fire and rescue services under-resourced. **We will review the region's fire and rescue service preparedness to ensure that our firefighters are resourced and equipped tackle wildfires early and address issues quickly before they spread.**



Tim Eagle | Moray

f [fb.com/TimEagleMoray](https://www.facebook.com/TimEagleMoray)
x [@TimEagleMoray](https://twitter.com/TimEagleMoray)

globe www.morayconservatives.org.uk
✉ tim@morayconservatives.org.uk



Jamie Halcro Johnston | Orkney Islands

f [fb.com/JamieHalcroJohnstonConservative](https://www.facebook.com/JamieHalcroJohnstonConservative)
x [@jhalcrojohnston](https://twitter.com/jhalcrojohnston)

globe www.islandsconservatives.org.uk
✉ jamiehalcrojohnston@gmail.com



Helen Crawford | Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch

f [fb.com/Helen4Highland](https://www.facebook.com/Helen4Highland)
✉ helenforhighland@gmail.com

globe www.helencrawford.com



Ruraidh Stewart | Inverness and Nairn

f [fb.com/RuraidhStewart](https://www.facebook.com/RuraidhStewart)
x [@ruraidh_stewart](https://twitter.com/ruraidh_stewart)

globe www.ruraidhstewart.com
✉ ruraidhstewart@ruraidhstewart.com



George Macpherson | Na h-Eileanan an Iar

f [fb.com/MacphersonforWI](https://www.facebook.com/MacphersonforWI)
x [@gmsmacpherson](https://twitter.com/gmsmacpherson)

globe www.islandsconservatives.org.uk
✉ g.macpherson470@gmail.com



Peter Wallace | Argyll and Bute

f [fb.com/VoteWallace](https://www.facebook.com/VoteWallace)
✉ peter@argyll-conservatives.org

globe www.votewallace.com



Donald Mackenzie | Caithness, Sutherland and Ross

f [fb.com/highlandcons](https://www.facebook.com/highlandcons)
✉ donald.mackenzie@live.com

globe www.highlandconservatives.co.uk



Douglas Barnett | Shetland Islands

f [fb.com/shetlandconservatives](https://www.facebook.com/shetlandconservatives)
✉ shetlandconservatives@gmail.com

globe www.islandsconservatives.org.uk

OUR PRIORITIES

DELIVERING FOR ALL HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS COMMUNITIES

- » Scottish Conservatives stand for improving our transport links. We will get the A9 and A96 dualled and upgrade key road infrastructure around the region including the A82 and A83. We will support our air links and put in place a long-term strategy for investing in our ferries.
- » We will protect local health services and facilities. We will oppose closure of any local healthcare facility or community hospital, support local and rural primary care and protect maternity services in places like Caithness and Moray from being downgraded.
- » Standing up for our rural economy. We will back business, including greater support for the region's small businesses, more certainty for farmers and fishermen and no more harmful regulation.
- » Providing a fair deal for the region's councils. No more cuts from Edinburgh being passed on into council tax rises and an end to communities being overruled by the Scottish Government on planning and energy consents.
- » Reducing the cost of living and taxes on families. We will support families and businesses with their energy costs, match the higher rate income tax threshold with the rest of the UK, uprate thresholds in line with inflation - and scrap LBTT on primary residences.
- » A moratorium on major energy projects pending a new National Energy Policy. We will ensure communities are put first when considering new energy infrastructure in the region.
- » Protecting the identity of our island communities. We will continue to stand by island-proofing of major policy decisions and engage meaningfully with our islands.

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Jobs, Business and Building a Strong Economy



Delivering high quality public services requires a strong economy. For too long, the Highlands and Islands have been held back by a lack of infrastructure and investment to grow.

GROWING OUR ECONOMY

It is vital that the next Scottish Government has an ambitious strategy for growth in the Highlands and Islands. This has been a tough time for local businesses and actions from the SNP Government - like the painful business rates revaluation - have only made things worse. **Scottish Conservatives will deliver a bold growth strategy for the region and invest in supporting the Highlands and Islands economy. We will reform business rates to avoid the cliff-edge effects of current thresholds - and to support businesses making improvements to their properties.**

Conservatives in government have delivered city and growth deals for Inverness and the Highlands, Argyll and Bute, Moray and the three island authorities. **We will work to ensure that the city region and regional growth deals, alongside the Green Freeport, continue to bring investment and drive cooperation at all levels of government. We will identify areas in need of economic regeneration and support local authorities to provide 100% regeneration rates relief in these areas where businesses are operating and creating jobs.**

High streets and town centres provide a vital social function for communities in addition to being economic hubs for parts of our region. But to grow and survive, these centres must change in line with the wider economy and ensure that they remain attractive destinations for local people and visitors alike. **We will support place-based investment in traditional high streets and town centres, while providing help to local councils to support these social and economic hubs. To tackle the blight of empty shop units, we will also empower councils to introduce rent auctions for commercial properties that have been purposefully left vacant by an owner for over 18 months. We will fund councils to abolish council car parking charges for stays of two hours or less.**

Highlands and Islands Enterprise has seen significant cuts to its functions under the SNP, risking investment in the region and reducing access to business support. The former Highlands and Islands Development Board showed how ambitious organisations, properly resourced, can drive real change in the region. **We will reverse SNP cuts to enterprise and introduce a new Scottish Growth Fund to support business. We will look to build greater cooperation between enterprise and skills agencies, as well as local Business Gateway services, to support economic development in the region and provide a one-stop shop for business support and advice.**

THE RURAL ECONOMY

The rural economy has been the backbone of the Highlands and Islands for generations, with our region's farmers and fishermen helping to create Scotland's global reputation for food and drink. But over the last parliament, rural incomes have fallen and agricultural businesses have felt pressure like never before - while facing endless changes to regulation from Holyrood. **We will provide support and certainty to Scotland's rural economy, with help to improve productivity and boost the rural affairs portfolio budget by £50 million. We will oppose any unnecessary new regulation on the food and drink sector - and support the industry to grow with a renewed focus on exports.**

Island farmers are often working at a disadvantage and will be hit hard by new Scottish Government greening requirements for agricultural payments - which fail to take account of island needs. **We will ensure that an islands exemption is put in place for greening rules. We will also provide support for a new abattoir facility in Orkney.**

Often support available to the rural economy from the government is a confusing mess of different funds and programmes. **We will create a single point of contact for rural support and review agricultural paperwork requirements as part of a wider review of the distribution and delivery of farm payments.**

THE VISITOR ECONOMY

We value the enormous contribution that tourism and the visitor economy makes to the Highlands and Islands and recognise its importance in creating jobs and supporting local businesses. There are occasions where the visitor economy causes harm to our local environment and creates costs that fall inappropriately on the local community. **We will support and promote responsible tourism and work with communities to address local concerns. We will hold a full review on regulatory barriers to the sector's success.**

The growth of inappropriate camping and camper vans has caused considerable concern across the region, often overwhelming local roads and damaging the natural environment with inappropriate and illegal dumping of waste. **We will explore the potential for more powers for local authorities to control inappropriate camping and campervan use in their areas.**

SUPPORTING LOCAL HOSPITALITY

The hospitality sector has borne the brunt of regulation and increased costs, and remains vital to our communities. **We will support the sector, ensuring that small businesses are not dragged into paying business rates.**

ENERGY

Labour and the SNP have failed the oil and gas industry - with promises of a "just transition" being exposed as little more than hot air. **We will work to support the industry and maximise extraction, including ensuring a future for key facilities like the terminals at Flotta and Sullom Voe.**

The landscape and natural environment of the Highlands and Islands is unique and should be cherished for future generations. We recognise local concerns about the industrialisation of rural areas caused by some energy projects, whether it be wind farms, solar farms, pylons or battery infrastructure. **We will introduce a time-limited pause on major renewable energy infrastructure applications until a Scottish Government published National Energy Policy can be produced, ensuring the right kit in the right place, for the right reasons.**

We will ensure a central role for communities in approving this sort of large-scale infrastructure in their areas, require large projects to provide clear community benefits and establish a compensation fund for communities already impacted by development. We will make pylons a last-resort option for infrastructure projects.

Too often, large-scale energy projects are imposed on communities from the top down, with local

objections disregarded and local planning authorities overruled. **We will abolish the Scottish Government's Energy Consents Unit and give powers to local authorities. We will also establish a Scotland-wide Planning Inquiry Commission to look at the cumulative and community effects of major renewables developments as a whole - and introduce a robust system of Economic Impact Assessments for developments, with specific consideration of rural communities, tourism, agriculture, local employment and food security.**

Too many people in the Highlands and Islands suffer from the high cost of heating their homes. Not only are energy costs high, but we are more exposed to economic shocks, like the recent spike in heating oil prices that have created significant unexpected costs for families and businesses. **Utilising forecast revenues from Crown Estate Scotland, we will provide households with an energy bill discount scheme. We will support the UK Government to regulate the heating oil industry and prevent price gouging. We will improve short-term support for domestic and business customers during this crisis as a matter of urgency.**

We need a long-term solution to ensure that those most in need are not suffering from the cold. **We will restore a Cold Weather Payment, on top of the existing Winter Heating Payment, for those in receipt of Pension Credit, when the temperature falls below zero for a week or more.**

HOUSING

The cost of housing in many parts of the region has become prohibitive. Young people are unable to find a home in the places they grew up and working-age people are disincentivised from coming to the region to live, work and do business. There is significant unmet demand for new housing, which is inflating costs in many communities. **We will unlock housebuilding - while seeking to build strong, sustainable and liveable communities for the future.**

In parts of the region there are specific shortages, including starter homes for first-time buyers and suitable properties for older people to downsize to later in life. **We will work with local authorities to identify specific local housing shortages and provide support to address rural depopulation, particularly in island communities.**

In remote and rural communities, housing costs and availability are often barriers to people taking up vital public sector jobs that will build and support communities. **We will work with local authorities to support delivery of keyworker housing in areas where there is a clear need to ensure the viability of public services.**



Conclusion

Tim Eagle | Candidate for Moray

Our record of delivery over the last five years for the Highlands and Islands shows just how much the Scottish Conservatives care about local communities across the region, and our plans for the next five years are all about building on those achievements.

The SNP Government has forgotten about our region during their near 20 years in power, but the Scottish Conservatives have a bold, common sense plan to get the Highlands and Islands back on track.

That includes dualling the A9 and A96 roads on time and fixing the potholes in our roads, fully backing our oil and gas sector, protecting small businesses from damaging rates hikes, building more houses so more people can live and work here, delivering new ferries for our islands, and investing in frontline NHS services and schools.

The SNP has allowed the Highlands and Islands to decline, with rising levels of depopulation across our communities. The Scottish Conservatives would reverse that decline, and offer a common sense plan

that encourages more people to stay in the region, raise a family and build a life here.

To ensure that happens, please vote for the Scottish Conservatives on your peach party ballot paper on 7 May.

Tim Eagle
Scottish Conservative candidate for Moray

