

**CHAMPIONING OUR COUNTRYSIDE**  
**Senedd Election 2026**



# Introduction

Wales is a country with breathtaking countryside, world-class food and drink producers and more castles per square mile than any other country in the world. Our countryside underpins our tourism sector, provides a place of recreation, supplies our food and supports thousands of livelihoods. All this means that we ask a great deal from our natural resources and we have a duty to manage those resources wisely.

The next Welsh government has an opportunity to 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.

In recent years, rural Wales has faced growing and competing pressures on land use. Large areas of productive farmland have been lost in the name of carbon sequestration, creating deep concern within rural communities. Companies from outside Wales have rushed to purchase farmland in order to plant trees to offset their carbon emissions with little or no regard for the effect that this has on heritage, culture, the Welsh language and food production. This approach risks undermining the very communities that have shaped and sustained the countryside for generations.

“The Welsh countryside is probably Wales’ greatest asset”  
(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)

98% of respondents said the Welsh government does not understand or represent the needs of rural Wales

(Respondents to the Welsh manifesto survey)



The top three issues concerning those who live and work in the countryside are:

79%

Food and farming

65%

Land management and land use

65%

Rural economy and jobs

(Respondents to the Welsh manifesto survey)

At the same time, Wales is experiencing a rapid expansion of green energy development. While renewable energy has an important role to play, the current rush for land needed for infrastructure, from solar panels to pylons, is displacing traditional livestock farming and reshaping landscapes without sufficient community consent or strategic planning. Environmental progress must not come at the expense of rural livelihoods, food security or cultural identity.

Rural Wales is a national asset and should be treated as such. The contribution and commitment of our farmers, gamekeepers and ghillies needs to be understood, appreciated and championed by future Members of the Senedd. This will enable them to continue to operate sustainably with the resources already available and to meet the challenges that an ever-changing rural Wales will face. Our communities deserve respect and will flourish under the right policies.

**Let's work together to promote, protect and nurture prosperity in the countryside.**

“Rural communities appear underrepresented in urban-centric Cardiff”

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)

**The next Welsh government must provide solutions to unlock the full potential of the countryside by:**

- ◆ Establishing a dedicated Countryside Champion to act as a liaison between rural communities 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 Welsh 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.



# Thriving rural communities

One in three people in Wales lives in a rural area. Thriving rural communities are essential to the nation's economy, food security, cultural heritage and well-being. To support them, the Welsh government must implement policies that work for the countryside, not against it. All policies should be rural-proofed so that communities are not disadvantaged by a one-size-fits-all approach.

Residents in rural towns and villages often lack access to basic services and amenities. People frequently travel long distances for healthcare, banking and essential shopping, while paying higher costs for fuel and transport. These pressures place a disproportionate financial and social burden on rural households, risking the hollowing out of communities unless addressed.

Rural crime is a growing concern. A recent Countryside Alliance survey found that 32% of crimes were not reported, as victims felt nothing would be done or they would not be taken seriously. Crimes such as agricultural machinery theft, livestock rustling and fly-tipping are often treated as low priority, despite their significant impact. Good rural policing is more than numbers, it requires working with communities to tackle these problems effectively.

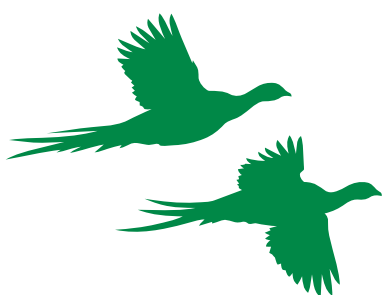
“Wales has great opportunities for recreation and tourism, it also has massive potential for food production if more support was offered in these areas”

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)



Tourism is vital to rural Wales. With blue flag beaches, historic landmarks, stunning landscapes, first-class food and accommodation, rural areas are major destinations for staycations and international visitors. The Welsh government must support this industry and enable it to flourish year-round not create barriers to its prosperity.

Country pursuits make a significant economic contribution. Shooting generates £60 million for the rural economy and sustains trade for rural pubs and hotels during the quieter winter months. Angling participation is increasing, with a 6% rise in rod licence sales in 2025 compared with 2024, and its health and wellbeing benefits are well recognised. Targeted government support would sustain and grow these contributions, helping rural communities thrive.



“The cost of living and rising fuel prices are major issues facing rural Wales”

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)



The Countryside Alliance rural crime survey found that 32% of rural crimes were not reported to the police

#### The Countryside Alliance calls on the next Welsh government to:

- ◆ Ensure policies are rural proofed so that rural communities are not disadvantaged by a one-size-fits-all policy.
- ◆ Work with the police, local authorities and other public bodies to ensure that rural crime is taken seriously and the impacts it has on rural communities is understood and tackled.
- ◆ Protect and maintain essential services, including local healthcare, banking, transport and postal services.
- ◆ Develop a 365 day a year tourism strategy, recognising the value of country pursuits and supporting hospitality establishments throughout the year.
- ◆ Reduce business rates in rural towns and villages, helping small businesses to survive and grow at the heart of their communities.

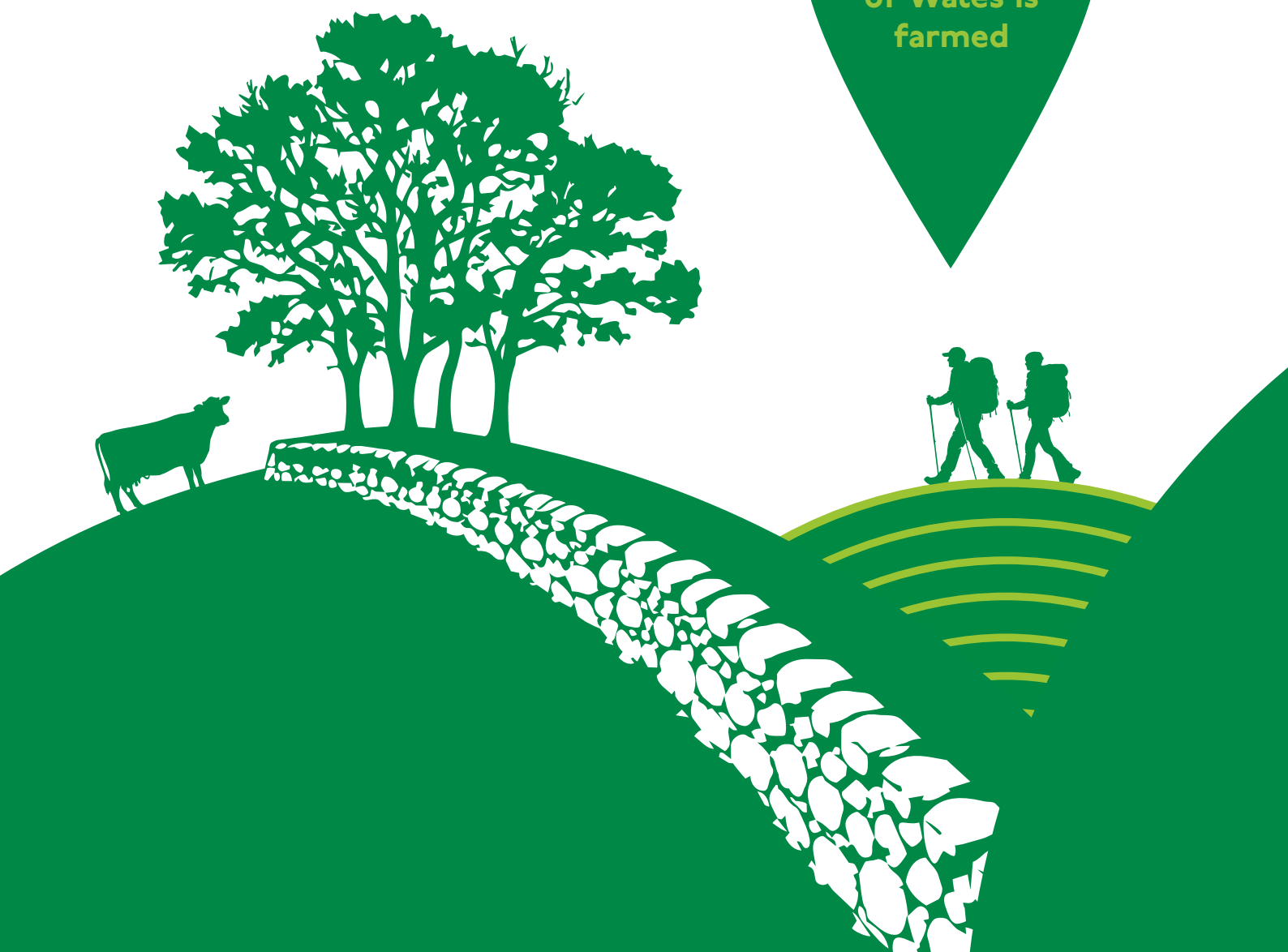
# Land use management

Access to the countryside is vital for health, wellbeing and the rural economy. Public health boards and the wider health sector must work with farmers and land managers to unlock rural Wales' potential, promoting outdoor engagement for all ages. Achieving this requires land use policies that balance environmental ambition with food production, community needs and long-term sustainability.

Yet, land use in Wales is increasingly being shaped by external interests and short-term policies. Productive farmland is being lost to companies, and even the Welsh government, planting trees for carbon offsetting. While environmental responsibility is essential, removing land from food production undermines farming livelihoods and threatens food security. True sustainability cannot come at the expense of rural resilience or the cultural fabric of our landscapes.

"Farmers are considered the custodians of the countryside; they should be helped to look after it through wildlife conservation and protective land management"  
(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)

**Over 90% of  
the land area  
of Wales is  
farmed**



The transition to cleaner energy adds further pressures. Large-scale solar and battery farms are being sited on productive land, while alternatives such as rooftops, brownfield sites and industrial estates are often overlooked. Energy infrastructure is frequently imposed on communities, prioritising cost over landscape, long-term environmental integrity and local needs.

A balanced approach is essential, one that protects food production, empowers local communities, enhances access to the countryside and delivers environmental benefits without undermining rural livelihoods. Rural Wales must be a partner in environmental and energy transitions, not a sacrifice zone.

“One of the greatest threats to our countryside is the exploitation of our landscape for commercial gain through renewable energy”

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)



### **The Countryside Alliance calls on the next Welsh government to:**

- ◆ Champion responsible access to the countryside, fostering healthy connections with nature and the great outdoors.
- ◆ Guarantee long-term financial support for farmers, prioritising food production while rewarding farmers and land managers for delivering social and environmental public goods.
- ◆ Support smaller, community-led renewable energy projects and protect productive land by adopting a “Rooftops First” policy for solar development in Wales.
- ◆ Set planning limits on the size and scale of wind farm developments, ensuring projects are proportionate, appropriately sited and do not compromise productive farmland or rural communities.
- ◆ Introduce a community levy for large-scale tree planting which passes the RCIA test that would be returned to the community for education and well-being.

# Managing our countryside

The Welsh countryside is a working landscape, shaped by people over centuries. Effective wildlife management is essential to maintain healthy populations of wild animals, protect habitats, support biodiversity and sustain food production. Without it, vulnerable species, ecosystems and the livelihoods of farmers and landowners are at risk.

“Focus on the whole landscape, including history and heritage, wildlife and aesthetics. None of these alone will be strong enough, we need to think of the landscape as a functional ecosystem”

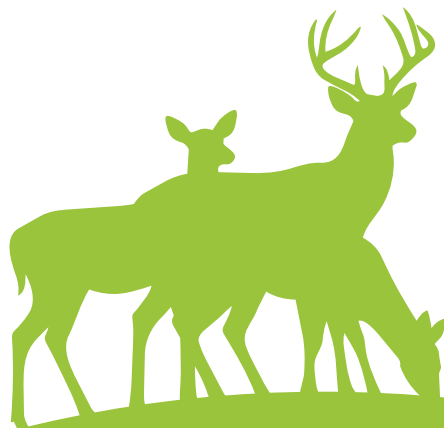
(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)

Wildlife management works best when delivered by farmers, gamekeepers and land managers using methods appropriate to local circumstances. Proper wildlife management aligns with animal welfare, with evidence showing that well-managed interventions are often critical to protecting habitats and species. Deer management allows natural regeneration and the establishment of new woodland. Fox and corvid control protects threatened species, and the eradication of invasive species such as mink and grey squirrels preserves our countryside. Restrictions on wildlife management threaten species, habitats, biodiversity and food security.



Access to the countryside brings major benefits for health, wellbeing and connection with nature. While pressure on landowners to provide land and water for recreation has grown, access must remain voluntary, reward-based and integrated into agricultural support schemes. The countryside is for everyone, but managed access ensures vulnerable habitats and wildlife are protected and food production is not compromised.

Policy on wildlife and countryside management must be guided by evidence, not ideology. Campaigns driven by an animal rights agenda, rather than science-based animal welfare, can hinder effective management and harm wildlife, the environment and communities. The Welsh government must take a principled, science-led approach, resisting pressure from petitions or opinion polls, and acting in the best interests of conservation, rural communities and sustainable food production.



“The government should work with land/estate managers and farmers, these are the people who protect our countryside and wildlife”

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)

### **The Countryside Alliance calls on the next Welsh government to:**

- ◆ Adopt a consistent, evidence based and principled approach to wildlife management, animal welfare and habitat protection across all species.
- ◆ Support and recognise the importance of wildlife management and the value of hunts, shoots and anglers to the Welsh rural economy.
- ◆ Develop environmental and wildlife management policies, working with stakeholders and practitioners, such as farmers and gamekeepers, for the benefit of Wales’ flora and fauna.
- ◆ Promote responsible access to the countryside by improving rights of way, making many unused paths accessible and creating safe circular routes.
- ◆ Review and strengthen the Deer Management Strategy for Wales, ensuring it supports woodland regeneration, biodiversity and sustainable land use.

# Harvesting our countryside


Wales' farmers and food producers deliver world-class produce enjoyed at home and abroad, while also managing and enhancing our beautiful countryside.

We need a Welsh government that not only champions farmers but works with them through the coming years of transition, ensuring they remain productive and competitive on a global scale. Food production and environmental stewardship must go hand in hand, grounded in the realities of practical farming.

The Welsh food and drink sector is highly innovative and benefits from strong geographical identity. Producers such as Velfrey Vineyard in Pembrokeshire exemplify the potential to integrate the sector into a national tourism strategy. Food trails could take people on a rich journey across Wales, strengthening rural economies while building "Brand Wales," linking food production and tourism to maximise economic potential.

"Prioritise local food procurement to cut food miles, reduce emissions and support local food production"

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)



"The biggest challenge for farmers in Wales is being enabled to produce food in sufficient quantities for the preservation of food security"

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)

Public sector food procurement remains a missed opportunity. Despite Wales' strong farming base, bodies such as local authorities source large volumes of meat from overseas. Countryside Alliance research into school chicken procurement found that in Merthyr Tydfil 99.35% of frozen chicken served in schools came from outside the EU, including Thailand. This undermines Welsh farmers and threatens our food security.

There is also growing potential in harvesting wild game, which provides farmers and landowners with both financial incentives and motivation to maintain fragile and flourishing habitats. Expanding the Welsh game meat sector requires targeted investment. The government must support the infrastructure needed to unlock its full environmental and economic potential, enabling Welsh game to compete with the rest of the UK.

"We need to promote foods from the game sector as healthy and sustainable"

(Respondent, Welsh manifesto survey)



### The Countryside Alliance calls on the next Welsh government to:

- ◆ Build on "Brand Wales" by continuing to invest in promoting world-class Welsh food and drink at home and abroad.
- ◆ Develop a dedicated food tourism strategy that creates food trails and experiences linking food production, hospitality and rural tourism, strengthening rural economies and showcasing Welsh produce.
- ◆ Expand and promote the Welsh wild game sector, supported by a marketing strategy that highlights its conservation, environmental and economic benefits.
- ◆ Prioritise Welsh produce in public sector procurement, such as ensuring school meals support local farming, upholding high animal welfare and environmental standards.
- ◆ Introduce transparency and reporting on public sector food procurement, making it clear where food is produced so parents, taxpayers and policymakers can see that public money is supporting the Welsh economy.

# About the Countryside Alliance

The Countryside Alliance has been a respected and an effective campaigning organisation at the Senedd since its inception. We have worked constructively with Senedd Members from across the political spectrum, as well as with the Welsh Government, building a strong reputation based on trust, expertise and collaboration.

In preparing this manifesto we conducted a survey of our members and supporters across Wales to identify their priorities for rural communities and the actions they expect from the next Welsh government. The insights gathered have informed the recommendations and policies set out in this manifesto.

Our work has included providing written and oral briefings, contributing to consultations, hosting successful events at the Senedd and participating in working groups that have helped shape policy.

We are the only membership organisation that campaigns across all rural affairs, including cultural, economic, environmental and community issues. Our team in Wales and London has many years of experience in campaigning to protect the rural way of life through political engagement, in the media and on the ground.

Whether representing an urban or rural constituency, a thriving, resilient and economically sustainable countryside benefits everyone. Achieving this depends on policies that are properly rural-proofed and informed by practical experience. We are ready to work with you to do just that.

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