

CHAMPIONING OUR COUNTRYSIDE

MANIFESTO
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
2022



Contents

2

Introduction

4

Protecting rural communities

5

Connecting Northern Ireland

7

Growing the rural economy

9

Enriching our countryside



Introduction

The Countryside Alliance Ireland manifesto sets out how the next Assembly can protect, connect and grow rural Northern Ireland.

Our countryside is a place of recreation, a larder, it underpins our tourism sector, and just as importantly, is a place of work for many as well as key to meeting the challenges of climate change. All this means we ask a great deal from our natural resources.

Rural Northern Ireland is an interwoven tapestry of cultural, economic, environmental and community issues. A threat to any one aspect could lead to the unravelling of the whole. Promoting and protecting our rural communities will be important for the next Assembly, especially now we have to adapt to the Protocol as a result of Brexit and as we recover from the devastation caused by Covid-19.

In addition, we are facing huge uncertainty around our food security due to the war in Ukraine. We are already seeing farmers trying to adapt by planting wheat in fallow fields to help meet the UK's food needs. Everything should be done to help them achieve this, and a long-term strategy developed to make us more resilient to outside factors in the future.

Introduction

For the rural economy to recover, communities to thrive, and the environment to be enhanced, rural areas must have the support of government with policies designed to do things *for* the countryside, not to the countryside, such as those included in this manifesto. Land managers and rural communities are part of the solution, not a problem, and this must be recognised if we are to meet environmental targets, increase biodiversity and adapt to climate change. All policy related to rural areas, from tackling crime to land management, must be based on sound evidence and, of course, rural-proofed. The success of rural Ulster is dependent on each sector, community and business working together to deliver on our environmental and economic ambitions as laid out in this document.

The next Northern Ireland Assembly must support all those who manage our countryside. Our work must be recognised for its contribution to achieving the environmental outcomes we all want to see. The Assembly must understand that only by working with us can we enhance Northern Ireland's biodiversity and deliver a prosperous, sustainable and vibrant landscape. Too often those who manage our wildlife and countryside are treated as a problem, rather than a key part of the solution. We need a new spirit of partnership between the Assembly and rural communities, with policies based on sound evidence and not divisive animal rights thinking from around the globe, as we saw with the recent Private Member's Bill seeking to prohibit the use of dogs in the management of wildlife.

Countryside Alliance Ireland calls on the next Assembly to:

- ◆ Pursue rural policy that will protect, connect and grow our rural communities.
- ◆ Base policy on sound evidence and research, taking into consideration the wider implications on those it will impact.
- ◆ Do things for the countryside, not to the countryside.
- ◆ Recognise that meeting the challenges of climate change and restoring nature can only be achieved by working with rural communities.
- ◆ Ensure public consultations on policy or legislation on devolved matters are geographically locked, the full respondent's details are captured as laid out in guidance, and any decisions are representative of the views of Northern Ireland's people.

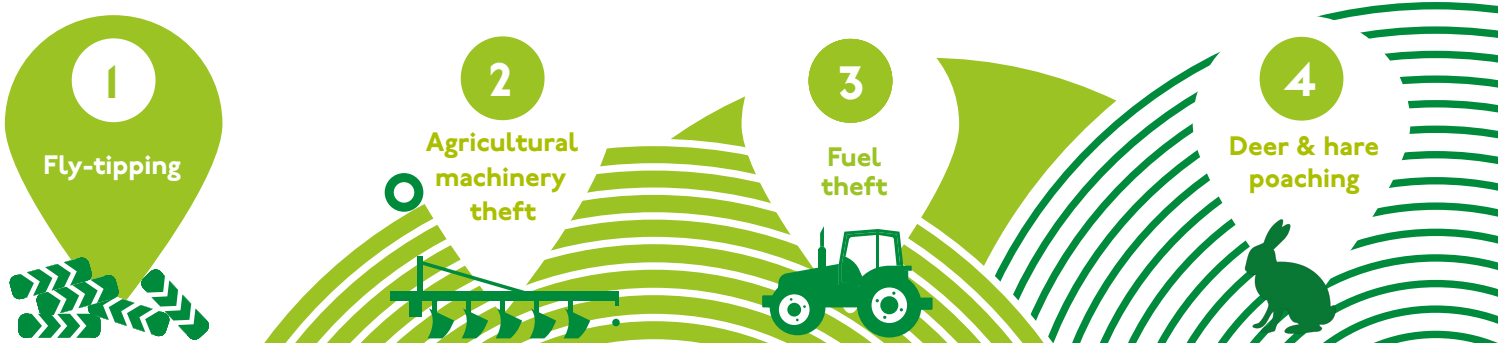
Protecting rural communities

Countryside Alliance research revealed that 84% of those surveyed believe rural crime is a significant issue in their community. The cost of living crisis and likely budget cuts, leading to a reduction in police officers, will only increase the perception that rural crime is not taken as seriously as urban crime and that it is getting worse not better, despite official statistics suggesting rural crime has improved in the last decade.

The cost of rural crime in Northern Ireland amounted to £2.1 million in 2021, and while this was down on the previous year this is likely due to Covid-19 restrictions.¹

Our survey found that 32% think the police do not take rural crime seriously and that 39% of those who have been a victim of rural crime do not report it to the police.

Rural crimes to tackle in order of priority²



Countryside Alliance Ireland calls on the next Assembly to:

- ◆ Undertake research to find out why people feel the police do not take rural crime seriously.
- ◆ Create a rural crime initiative to encourage all crimes to be reported to the police.
- ◆ Tailor solutions to address rural communities' policing needs.
- ◆ Ensure fair funding for rural policing, taking account of lower population densities and the additional costs of delivering services over a wider area.

¹ NFU Mutual Rural Crime Report 2021

² Countryside Alliance Rural Crime Survey 2020

Connecting Northern Ireland

With many of us now working from home more, the demands on our broadband and mobile phone infrastructure have never been clearer. Connecting rural Northern Ireland digitally remains a significant challenge.

Northern Ireland continues to have the lowest coverage of superfast broadband in the UK (90.2%); with England having the highest (97.5%); followed by Wales (96%) and then Scotland (94.8%). Northern Ireland continues to have the UK's highest proportion of internet non-users, standing at 14.2%.³

Only 66% of rural communities in Northern Ireland have access to superfast broadband compared to 99% of urban homes. Only 36% of rural areas have access to full-fibre broadband compared to 85% in urban areas, and 2.1% of households are unable to get any decent broadband coverage.⁴



Mobile connectivity is poorer in rural areas

Countryside Alliance Ireland calls on the next Assembly to:

- ◆ Prioritise digital connectivity in rural Northern Ireland so that those hard-to-reach places are connected first.
- ◆ Continue to invest in Project Stratum until we achieve 100% connectivity for rural communities.
- ◆ Work constructively with the UK Government to ensure that rural Northern Ireland is connected, especially the hardest-to-reach places.
- ◆ Provide training and support for Northern Ireland's non-internet users.

³ <https://www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/2021/11/16/an-overview-of-the-digital-divide-in-northern-ireland/>

⁴ Connected Nations 2021: Northern Ireland report (ofcom.org.uk)

Mobile connectivity is also poorer in rural areas. All 4G not-spots in Northern Ireland (21%) are found in rural areas, the highest not-spot percentage in the UK. The geographic coverage by single operators is also significantly behind urban areas. The next Northern Ireland Assembly must make connecting rural Northern Ireland a priority. Doing so will help Northern Ireland become a leader in digitalisation, which could result in a GDP increase of £1.3 billion by 2025.⁵

For rural businesses to recover from Covid-19 it is essential that they are afforded the same conditions as elsewhere in Northern Ireland. While the roll out of Project Stratum, the Assembly's broadband infrastructure project, does go some way to address poor digital connectivity, rural communities are still at a disadvantage. This has only been exacerbated by the pandemic, as it seems everyone and everything has moved online.

The Centre for Economics and Business Research estimates that 25% of the workforce could be working from home on any given day by 2025 and that digital improvements could increase employment by 1.2m in the UK. They note that home working provides an opportunity to spread digital jobs around the country.⁶



Northern Ireland continues to have the lowest coverage of superfast broadband in the UK



5 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/22972/connected-nations-2021-northern-ireland.pdf

6 Broadband infrastructure and boosting economic recovery: The role of Full Fibre in Northern Ireland

Growing the rural economy

Tourism is an important sector for rural Northern Ireland. Country sports play a key part, especially during late autumn and winter months, after the summer tourism season has ended. The next Assembly must recognise that communities and businesses in rural Northern Ireland are dependent on each other, so the success of one industry promotes the success of others.

Sporting enterprises contribute to their local economies and also help achieve environmental outcomes. Shooting and associated sporting enterprises generate significant economic and environmental benefits for local communities, with impacts generally focussed in areas where game shooting is most prevalent. The latest available data (2013) found that 770 FTE jobs (both direct and indirect) are associated with shooting. This number will have likely grown, as will the £29 million (GVA) per annum contribution to the NI economy.⁷

There were 26,137 angling licences issued by DAERA in 2017 and £566,979 was generated from the sale of licences and permits. In total, 40% of revenue came from angling licence sales, 53% from angling permit sales, 6% from commercial licence sales and 2% from dealer licences.⁸

Taking into account the game, coarse and sea/shore angling areas, it's estimated the aggregate gross expenditure contribution of NI resident anglers was £39.3 million in 2005. Approximately 715 full-time equivalent jobs are supported through the direct and multiplier impacts of the expenditures undertaken by local game, coarse and sea anglers in Northern Ireland.⁹

Northern Ireland has 14 fabulous blue flag beaches, historical landmarks and buildings plus landscapes to explore, as highlighted through TV productions such as Game of Thrones, along with first class food and accommodation, which makes it the perfect destination for staycations and for visitors from across the world. It is therefore no wonder that Northern Ireland is hugely dependent on tourism, especially in rural areas where the natural environment is the star attraction. The new Northern Ireland Assembly must support this important industry and allow it to flourish.



7 PACEC Value of shooting

8 A strategic review of angling - Economic impact of angling

9 Digest of statistics for salmon and inland fisheries in the DAERA jurisdiction 2019

Access to the outdoors has been proven to improve people's health and wellbeing. Public health boards and the health sector would benefit greatly from engaging with land managers to unlock the potential of rural areas to improve the health of the nation, contributing to the rural economy. The pandemic has highlighted the obvious need for greater engagement with the outdoors through education for all ages.

Access reform is likely to be on the agenda in Northern Ireland in the near future, and there will be increasing pressure on landowners to provide more land and water for outdoor recreation. Increasing access can be an opportunity for rural businesses, but it must be done on a voluntary and reward-based basis, respecting the fact that the countryside is also a place where people live and work. It needs to be recognised and rewarded in any future agricultural support scheme that replaces the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Under the Northern Ireland protocol, the next Northern Ireland Executive has the opportunity to design its own agricultural support programme under the future agriculture policy framework.

The next Northern Ireland Assembly must develop any new access rights with the understanding that the Northern Ireland countryside is a place of work, as well as a home, to those that live and work there. Fundamentally, increasing rights of access must respect the rights of communities and not be detrimental to rural businesses or the environment.



Countryside Alliance Ireland calls on the next Assembly to:

- ◆ **Rural proof all national policy to ensure that it works for rural areas.**
- ◆ **Recognise the economic benefits that country pursuits bring to rural communities.**
- ◆ **Work with sporting enterprises and all other interested parties to ensure future policies are workable on the ground and beneficial for communities and the environment.**
- ◆ **Support and promote an enhanced tourism strategy to help regenerate this hard-hit sector following the pandemic.**
- ◆ **Design an agriculture support policy that rewards landowners for providing the public with enhanced outdoor opportunities and driving economic growth.**

Enriching our countryside

Farmers, gamekeepers and huntsmen all play an important role in managing Northern Ireland's landscapes and will be central to our green recovery. Success will depend on how land is used and wildlife managed.

Northern Ireland proudly produces world-class beef, lamb, poultry and game. For these industries to continue to be world-class, we must set the right conditions. For example, it is imperative that farmers can still carry out essential pest control to protect their livestock. Controlling pest species with dogs must continue and the number of dogs employed should not be restricted.

As Northern Ireland has not carried out an independent review we only have to look to Scotland. As Lord Bonomy found in the Scottish Government commissioned review of the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002, "...searching and flushing by two dogs would not be as effective as that done by a full pack of hounds, but also that imposing such a restriction could seriously compromise effective pest control in the country, particularly on rough and hilly ground and in extensive areas of dense cover such as conifer woodlands".¹⁰

Unfortunately, the Scottish Government has decided to ignore the evidence and instead is proposing populist legislation, rather than good legislation based on fact, which would restrict pest control with dogs. On 25 February 2022 its own nature protection agency, NatureScot, published a scientific review calling for more fox control.¹¹ The study into the perilous state of the capercaillie population in Scotland concluded that there was a need for more lethal control of foxes and crows.



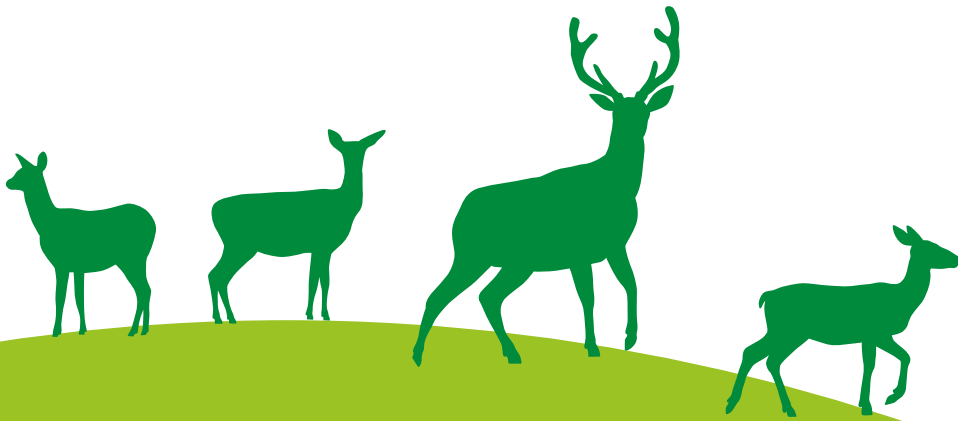
¹⁰ Lord Bonomy, Report of the review of the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002

¹¹ Review of Capercaillie Conservation and Management - Report to the Scientific Advisory Committee

In Northern Ireland farmers rely on hunts to carry out effective pest control to protect their livestock. The Ulster Farmers' Union has confirmed that pest control to protect lambs in the spring, when they are at their most vulnerable from fox predation, is especially important in areas such as the Glens of Antrim. Hunts provide a vital service to farmers not just during lambing but throughout the year. By being able to call upon the hunt at any time when foxes are known to be in the vicinity, the hunt has proved time and time again to be successful in ensuring the fox population is properly managed, protecting vulnerable livestock and wildlife.

Many farms around Lough Neagh are in receipt of the Higher Level Environmental Farming Scheme as they provide an environment to encourage "waders" such as curlew, lapwings and oyster catchers to visit and nest there. This has worked well, but without rigorous control of foxes, all of this conservation work would be in vain. Foxes predate these ground nesting birds, taking the parent birds as well as their eggs and chicks. They face a constant and uphill struggle to survive and without the intervention of the hunt in keeping fox numbers under control, there simply would not be any ground nesting waders left. Over the years hunting with a pack of foxhounds has proved to be a most effective, as well as the most humane, method of managing the fox population.

Those who favour and promote the animal rights agenda, as opposed to animal welfare, often advocate approaches which are not supported by evidence and therefore hinder management, to the detriment of both animals and the environment.



Countryside Alliance Ireland calls on the next Assembly to:

- ◆ Support landscape management practices by including them in future agricultural schemes.
- ◆ Ensure farmers can continue to undertake effective legal pest control to support and protect their livelihoods.
- ◆ Guarantee that any replacement for CAP supports food production, as well as rewarding farmers and land managers for the many environmental goods they deliver.
- ◆ Recognise and support the importance of wildlife management associated with hunting, shooting, and fishing as well as the contribution these make to the rural economy.
- ◆ Base future policies on principle and evidence, and resist the pressure from ideological petitions and polls, rather than what objective evidence shows is best for animals.

Countryside Alliance Ireland

Email: gary@caireland.org

Telephone: 07712525493

<https://countrysideallianceireland.org/>

