

## A 'green and pleasant land'? Public attitudes to the countryside in Northern Ireland

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Over the last few decades policy towards the countryside across Europe in general and Northern Ireland in particular has undergone a sea-change. By far the most significant policy affecting the countryside was the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) aimed at increasing agricultural productivity and producing a fair standard of living for the agricultural community. In many respects the CAP was a very successful policy (perhaps over-achieving its key aims) but also proving to be an extremely expensive policy. In the late 1960s it accounted for a massive 85% of the EU budget, and continues to account for almost 40% of that budget. More recent difficulties for the CAP include

the expansion of the EU, which make the CAP financially impossible to implement in its current form (Hunter, 2000), and pressure from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) that CAP was trade distorting. Within the public arena, there has also been a moral reaction to a policy which produced surpluses of food later destroyed at great cost (Bryden and Shucksmith, 2000). These are among the reasons why the CAP has been undergoing reform since the early 1990s and the impetus behind the MacSharry Reforms. These were in turn followed by the Agenda 2000 negotiations, deals made at the Uruguay round of agricultural negotiations, the Berlin Agreement, and finally in 2003, the

Fischler Reforms which have decoupled agricultural subsidies from production. The resulting reforms of the CAP scale back the level of support given to producers, begin to address the WTO concerns, and tackle the serious problem of over-production that exists in the EU. This means that expenditure on agriculture (though not rural development) will be held steady in real terms between 2006 and 2013, despite the admission of 10 new member states in 2004. Further reforms are anticipated after 2013.

### Legitimacy of agricultural subsidies and 'public goods'

Against this background of reforms there is an overarching acknowledgement of the need to consolidate support for the subsidisation of agriculture by demonstrating that farmers provide **public goods** valued by the public. Both the EU and the individual European Governments, including for example Britain and Germany, are increasingly promoting the argument that farmers are being subsidised because they are producing goods valued by the public. The Curry Report commissioned by the British Government in the wake of the Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic of 2002 stressed the need for 'reconnection' between farmers and consumers, and the importance of 'engagement' (Policy Commission

on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002). Engagement informs the public about the goods that farmers produce for the general public, and informs farmers about what the general public value most about their occupation. Yet, information on public attitudes to the countryside, and what are viewed as the public goods that farmers should be subsidised to produce, is not readily available. For this reason **The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** included a module on public attitudes to the countryside in 2004.

This Research update focuses on two components of the survey. First it provides an overview of public attitudes to farming, and second it considers perceptions of life in the countryside.

## What does the public value about farmers and farming?

In general, respondents were approving of the role of farms and farmers in the countryside. As Table 1 shows, there was strong agreement *that farms and farming families keep the countryside alive* (89%), *that farms add to the beauty of the countryside* (83%) and *that Northern Ireland farmers produce better quality safe food than that produced elsewhere* (67%). There was also very strong disagreement with the statement *that farming as a way of life should be allowed to die out* (91%) and *that farmers are just concerned with making money and don't care about the countryside* (71%).

Table 1: How much do you agree or disagree with the following...

	% agreeing	% disagreeing
Farms and farming families keep the countryside alive	89	3
Farms add to the beauty of the countryside	83	5
NI farmers produce better quality safe food than produced elsewhere	67	9
Farmers are subsidised far too much these days	22	45
Farmers are just concerned with making money and don't care about the countryside	12	71
Farming as a way of life should be allowed to die out in our society	4	91
All things considered, farmers do a good job in looking after the countryside	66	9
Modern methods of farming have caused damage to the countryside	46	20

Interestingly and contrary to some media reports, 45% of respondents disagreed that farmers are subsidised too much, while 23% agreed and 21% neither agreed or disagreed, and 13% don't know. While most respondents felt that farmers do a good job looking after the countryside (66%), many also thought that modern farming practices have caused damage to the countryside (46%). One reservation then that emerged from what was otherwise a public highly supportive of farms and farmers in Northern Ireland. The survey also included a further question relating to subsidies that was perhaps more hard-hitting. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that *Government should withhold some*

sense of the 'threats' to Northern Ireland farmers. As Table 2 shows, the most common view was that this was competition from the global food market (31%), followed by the cost of complying with EU regulations (22%). Views differed slightly between respondents who lived in urban areas and those who lived in the countryside themselves. The largest discrepancy between urban and rural dwellers was that 27% of the latter felt that the biggest threat to farmers was the reduction in subsidies to farmers over time from 2005, compared with 18% of the former.

The issue of subsidising farmers and farming is worth looking at in more detail. Against a background of a level

Table 2: Threats to farmers

Main threat to farmers	%		
	Urban dwellers	Rural dwellers	All respondents
Competition from the global food market	32	31	31
The cost of complying with EU regulations	22	22	22
The reduction in subsidies to farmers over time from 2005	18	27	20
New countries joining the European Union	16	15	16
None of these	2	1	2
Don't know	10	5	10

*subsidies from farmers and use them to protect the countryside, even if this leads to higher food prices.* But there was little public appetite for this kind of action. Only a quarter of respondents agreed (26%), 42% disagreed and a further quarter (26%) were neutral.

Given the level of support to farmers and farming in Northern Ireland it is interesting to look at the public's

of public suspicion about the level of subsidies, it is nonetheless the case that many farmers in Northern Ireland could not survive economically without subsidies. The remaining question on subsidies clarifies the situation in terms of public attitudes. Respondents were asked:

*Many farmers in Northern Ireland could not survive economically without subsidies. Which of these three statements comes closest to your own view about the levels to which farmers in Northern Ireland should be subsidised:*

*If farms in Northern Ireland cannot survive without subsidies then they should be forced to close or sell up just like any other business*

*Or*

*Farming in Northern Ireland should be preserved at all costs*

Or  
*Farming in Northern Ireland should be subsidised to some degree to help farms survive – but not at any cost*

Just over two thirds of respondents (68%) believed that farming in Northern Ireland should be subsidised to some degree. A not insignificant 23% felt that farming in Northern Ireland should be preserved at all costs, while very few respondents (7%) felt that if farms in Northern Ireland cannot survive without subsidies then they should be forced to close or sell up. The remaining 3% of respondents said they did not know. There was little difference in opinion on this matter regardless of the area in which the respondent lived.

### The rural idyll: A romantic idea of rural life

*It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys of London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.*

Arthur Conan Doyle – ‘Copper Beeches’

Despite the views of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, a great deal of research over the last sixty years has found that people have a romantic view of rural life, and view the quality of life to be better in rural areas. Among other questions, the survey asked people where they currently live and where they would wish to live, whether they think there is less crime in rural areas, whether they think there is more community spirit in rural areas, and whether the countryside is a better place to live and bring up children.

Figure 1 contrasts where people currently live with where they would wish to live. In broad terms the popularity of a place to live is in inverse proportion to the size of its population. Big cities are unpopular while a farm or home in the country is more than

four times as popular. Only 7% of people said they would live in a big city if they could choose where to live, while 29% said they would live on a farm or in a home in the country. The contrast between where people would like to live and where they actually live is marked. While more than one half of respondents would wish to live in a country village or a farm/home in the country, only half that proportion currently does so. Happiest with their situation are respondents who currently live on a farm or in a home in the country.

What is the popularity of the countryside as a place to live based upon? Unsurprisingly, respondents believe that there is less crime in the countryside (see Table 3).

in mixed rural/urban areas there are 54 crimes and in urban areas there are 92 crimes.

Social science research has long shown that people believe there is a stronger sense of community spirit in rural areas. Community spirit is understood as a sense of belonging to an area, knowing your neighbours and a high degree of participation in civic and social activities (Putnam, 2000). As Table 4 shows, the majority of respondents to the Life and Times survey (70%) certainly felt that there was more community spirit in the countryside. Interestingly though, the evidence with regard to this is equivocal.

Figure 1: Area of residence and area of preference

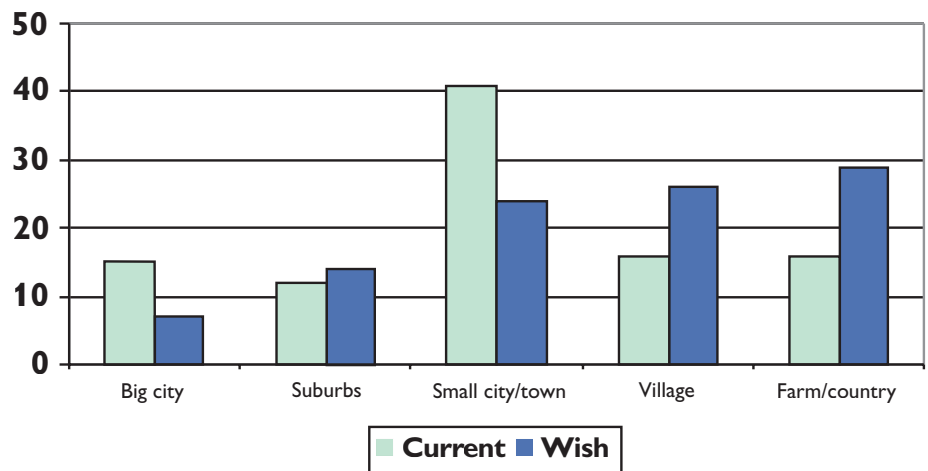


Table 3: There is less crime in the countryside

	%
Agree strongly	11
Agree	55
Neither agree nor disagree	14
Disagree	17
Disagree strongly	1
Can't choose	3

Of course, this perception is indeed born out by recorded crime figures. An examination of the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s (PSNI) 2004/2005 data indicates that, per 1,000 people living in rural areas, there are 33 crimes,

Table 4: There is more community spirit in the countryside

	%
Agree strongly	20
Agree	50
Neither agree nor disagree	18
Disagree	6
Disagree strongly	1
Can't choose	4

The 2005 Life and Times Survey included a number of questions which asked about participation in community life. It found that urban dwellers were more active in civic and social activities than rural dwellers. Rural dwellers were less

likely to have taken part in a political campaign, discussed politics or political news with someone else or contacted the local council. They were also less likely to have done voluntary work, helped organise a charity event or taken part in a sponsored event. So while there is clearly a perception that there is more community spirit in the countryside, the 2005 Life and Times Survey did not provide evidence to support this perception.

The majority of people taking part in the 2004 Life and Times Survey (70%) also perceived the countryside as a better place to bring up children and rejected the notion that the countryside was boring. The belief that the countryside is a better place to bring up children is true for all age groups while the notion that the countryside is boring is slightly more prevalent among young people. Overall only 13% felt that the countryside was boring but older people were even less

likely to agree with these sentiments.

## Conclusions

Two issues of interest are touched on here: public attitudes to farmers and farming, and public attitudes to living in rural areas. While there is often a sense of a negative public perception of farmers, farming activities and the cost of subsidising farming, this is not borne out by the results of this public attitudes survey. Generally people are supportive of the farming community and perceive them to contribute goods of public benefit. In terms of public attitudes to living in rural areas, there is a very positive perception of life in rural areas. Some but not all of these perceptions are supported by existing data. The perception that there is less crime in the countryside seems accurate, but there is not evidence to support the perception that there is a stronger sense of community spirit in the countryside. A majority of people perceive the countryside to be a better

place to live and bring up children, and the vast majority, consistently across age groups, disagreed that the countryside is a boring place to live.

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## Key Findings:

- 89% of people surveyed perceived farms and farming families as keeping the countryside alive
- 83% view farms as adding to the beauty of the countryside
- 67% think that Northern Ireland farmers produce better quality safe food than that produced elsewhere
- 91% disagreed with the statement that farming as a way of life should be allowed to die out
- 68% believe that farming in Northern Ireland should be subsidised to some degree
- 63% perceive there to be less crime in the countryside
- 67% agreed that there is more community spirit in the countryside
- 72% perceive the countryside to be a better place to raise children

The Life and Times Survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2004, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

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