

**Conservative
Rural Forum**

**MANIFESTO
2024**

**A plan to win
the rural vote**





FOREWORD

I am delighted to write the foreword to the Conservative Rural Forum's manifesto. I commend the work the CRF does to make sure our Party retains the support of people in rural areas in the upcoming General Election, and beyond.

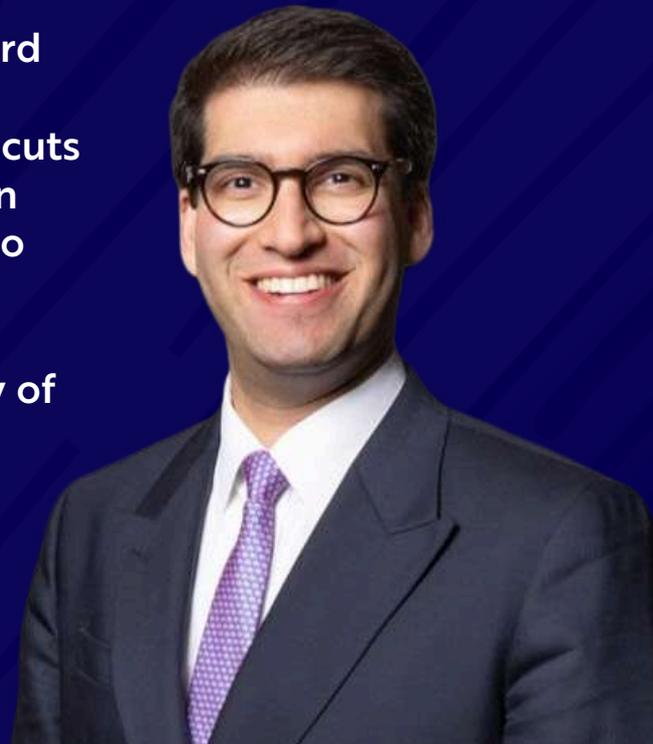
As a former Environment Secretary, and as Member of Parliament for North East Hampshire, I have seen the challenges facing the countryside from different perspectives. This manifesto aims to address some of the most salient concerns in rural and remote communities – many of which my constituents raise with me – including a push for each police force in a rural area to have a dedicated rural crime team and the recommendation of a working group to 'rural proof' health policy.

I strongly support the proposal for arms-length bodies like Natural England and the Environment Agency to be brought back 'in house' to Defra too. This is at the vanguard of the Conservative policy debate, and this is why groups like the CRF are so important – the CRF can challenge the status quo to best represent countryside communities, in line with Conservative principles.

Since 2010, our Party has launched new productivity grants for farmers, helped farmers make the most of their produce with the 'Adding Value' grant to unlock investment in farm shops and direct sales, and made sure that over 97% of Britain now has superfast broadband coverage.

There is more to do – and there is much to guard against. The disastrous Welsh Labour-led rural policies, from blanket 20mph zones to budget cuts of £62 million to funding for rural affairs, are an indication of the damage that would be done to Britain in her entirety. We must stick to the Conservative plan, as there is no doubt that a Labour government would attack the rural way of life, taking us back to square one.

Rt Hon Ranil Jayawardena MP
CRF Parliamentary Patron



ABOUT THE CONSERVATIVE RURAL FORUM

The CRF is a membership organisation affiliated with the Conservative Party that exists to promote the rural agenda within the Party and Government. In addition to a national membership structure, the CRF has a parliamentary caucus that focuses on driving policies that benefit rural communities.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this manifesto do not necessarily reflect the views of each of CRF members, Parliamentarians or Executive. CRF retained editorial independence throughout the drafting of this work.

INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIR

In my first year as Chairman of the CRF, I have been repeatedly impressed at the knowledge, understanding and care shown by Conservative MPs and Peers towards rural communities. I am grateful to the 30 MPs who shared their ideas for this manifesto, alongside key stakeholders such as the CLA, CAAV, BASC, Countryside Alliance, NFU and Oftec.

We aimed to compile policies to support a thriving rural economy and address some of the barriers faced by those living in rural or remote areas. These policies would enhance the fantastic work that has already been done by the Government, such as the Rural Development Fund which has delivered hundreds of millions of pounds of investment to rural communities or the National Food Strategy which outlined how to support farmers who are feeding the nation.

The Conservatives are the only Party who will deliver for rural communities and we hope this will remain front and centre in the 2024 General Election manifesto.

Cllr Lizzie Hacking
Chair, Conservative Rural Forum



TRANSPORT



Commitment not to introduce road pricing - Those who live in rural areas travel 56% further each year on average than those in urban areas. A road pricing policy would unfairly target those who live rurally as public transport options are not available. [1]



Extend £2 bus fare cap scheme – The successful £2 bus fare cap scheme is currently due to run to December 2024. This should be extended to help support those in rural communities with affordable travel. [9]

ENERGY



Protect our most productive land from Solar Installations - Grade 1, 2 and 3 land is our most productive. Often these are located in areas where settlements have built up and where energy is used. Solar installers are therefore keen to put panels as close to demand as possible. A popular policy would be to ban installations on our most productive land, encouraging installation on the remaining 50% of land in the UK that is grade 4 and below [2]



Launch RLHFO consultation and implement conclusions quickly - Following the solution of a Renewable Liquid Heating Fuel Obligation (RLHFO) in the Energy Act 2023, rural voters need certainty that the policy will be delivered and renewable liquid fuels will become a reality. The consultation associated with RLHFO mechanism should be launched quickly and its conclusions implemented as soon as possible.

ENERGY



Extend Heating Oil tax break to HVO Fuel - There are 1.7 million households (4 million people) that live off the gas grid and use oil heating. Counterintuitively, renewable liquid fuels such as HVO attract a 10p/l fuel duty whereas heating oil does not. 88% of respondents to recent surveys would switch to sustainable HVO fuel if it had no additional cost. [3]

EDUCATION



Encouraging the opportunity for schools to introduce food, farming and cooking - Many of our voters were taught home-economics at school. With shifting budgets the numbers learning this have reduced and often children have little understanding of where their food comes from. The National Food Strategy outlined that teaching young children basic skills sets them up for life. [4]



ECONOMY



Extend permitted development rights - Earlier this year government undertook a consultation on whether to change existing permitted development rights to make it easier for farmers to change their existing agricultural buildings to homes and businesses. Class Q should be amended to enable the change of use of all buildings in a rural use, rather than just agricultural use. This would unlock greater benefit to the rural economy by encouraging diversification. Repurposing redundant agricultural buildings and sites should also be encouraged and the recommendations of the Unleashing Rural Opportunity Paper adopted. [5]



Enshrine access to cash into legislation - Recommendations from LINK's access to rural cash, should be adopted. Our voters are often cash driven and access to cash in rural areas is dwindling.[6]



Fairer funding distribution for local authorities - Recognising the additional costs that local authorities in rural areas require to provide the same level of service as urban councils.



Introduce Satellite vouchers where Fibre is unavailable - Fibre in our most remote areas not possible, with the Government still providing vouchers costing thousands of pounds. Starlink and other satellite providers can provide fibre speeds for hundreds of pounds. The introduction of these vouchers will help bridge the productivity gap in rural communities. [7]



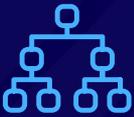
Strengthen mobile phone coverage – Ensure calls can be made when travelling in rural areas and that coverage is strong enough to work successfully inside buildings.

FIELDSPORTS



Drop licensing requirements for gamebird releases - Natural England is currently consulting on introducing licenses for gamebird releases, whilst they say they will not restrict licenses this is the first step to controlling shooting. Shooting is worth £2 billion to the rural economy and responsible for thousands of jobs. [8]

ENVIRONMENT



Bring Natural England and the Environment Agency back into Defra – Bring delegated responsibilities of Natural England and the Environment Agency back into Defra to allow for more joined-up decision making and greater levels accountability to ministers.



Septic tank upgrades to be a nutrient neutrality offset – Old fashioned septic tanks discharge directly into water courses. The replacement of a single septic tank with a modern treatment plant (such as Clargester) will remove equivalent nutrients from a watercourse as between 10-43 new houses. The cost of replacing a septic tank averages at c£15,000 which is a significant bill for any homeowner. Developers should be allowed to agree to change septic tanks on the same watercourse as effective nutrient neutrality mitigation. If necessary, register an obligation not to return to a septic tank on the Land Registry as a charge to the property.



HEALTH



Make dentistry training more rural-focused - There is a shortage of dentists in rural and coastal areas as dentist graduates often settle where they complete their foundation training. Rather than expanding current dental schools, opportunities should be explored to build new ones in rural areas and provide training opportunities away from urban settings. [10]



Greater rural-proofing of health policy - Adopt the recommendation of the EFRA Committee to form a national working group to 'rural proof' health policy, in particular mental health support in rural areas. [11]



Expand mobile diagnostics hubs – Earlier this year the Government introduced mobile breast cancer screening units. Mobile diagnostics hubs could target harder-to-reach areas where long distances or transport challenges can be a deterrent to accessing medical care. [12]

CRIME



Commitment for every rural police force to have a dedicated rural crime team - In the ten years from when the first was introduced, RCT's have been incredibly successful in tackling the causes of rural crime whilst instilling a sense of ownership and confidence in police forces for rural communities. Making a commitment for every force to have its own RCT would be a popular policy. [13]

AGRICULTURE



Taking back biosecurity control from Wales – The Welsh government is failing farmers and livestock, TB is at its lowest level in 15 years in England and at its highest in 32 years in Wales. Cross border trade is increasing and this is putting the Nation's livestock at risk. [14]



Introduce a rural retirement dwelling - There are a generation of young farmers keen and able to take on their family farm or become new entrants. IHT relief incentivises farmers to die in their farmhouses rather than pass on the farm. Introducing permission to construct a retirement bungalow that retains the farmer IHT relief would unlock a generation of farmers. [15]



Agri-trade advisors attached to embassies - Purchasing power of parity in some developing nations will increase by 1100% in the next decade and the rising middle classes want safe food of great quality. Britain is in a perfect position to benefit from these emerging markets. When entering new markets every other large food trading nation has agri-food advisors based in their embassies and we do not. A commitment to fund these advisors would help to increase trade. [16]



Support for abattoirs and regional funding for mobile slaughterhouses - Shorter journey times increase welfare and providing farmers the opportunity to sell directly increases farm profitability. Mobile abattoirs are incredibly popular in Italy & France where they service a growing market. [17]

AGRICULTURE



Commitment to preserve the rights of private property against the Right to Roam - Labour's 2019 report 'Land of the Many' outlined their aspiration of a countryside for all, undoing property rights and introducing a Scottish right to roam, this was until recently Labour policy. By putting a commitment to preserve the rights of property, we would be forcing a conversation with Labour to denounce their previous work. [18]



Adopt the recommendations in the Rock Review – over 30% of all land in the UK is tenanted, landlord and tenant relations are vital to secure the future of the UK's food security. The Rock Review contains over 70 recommendations and these should be adopted almost entirely.

FURTHER INFORMATION



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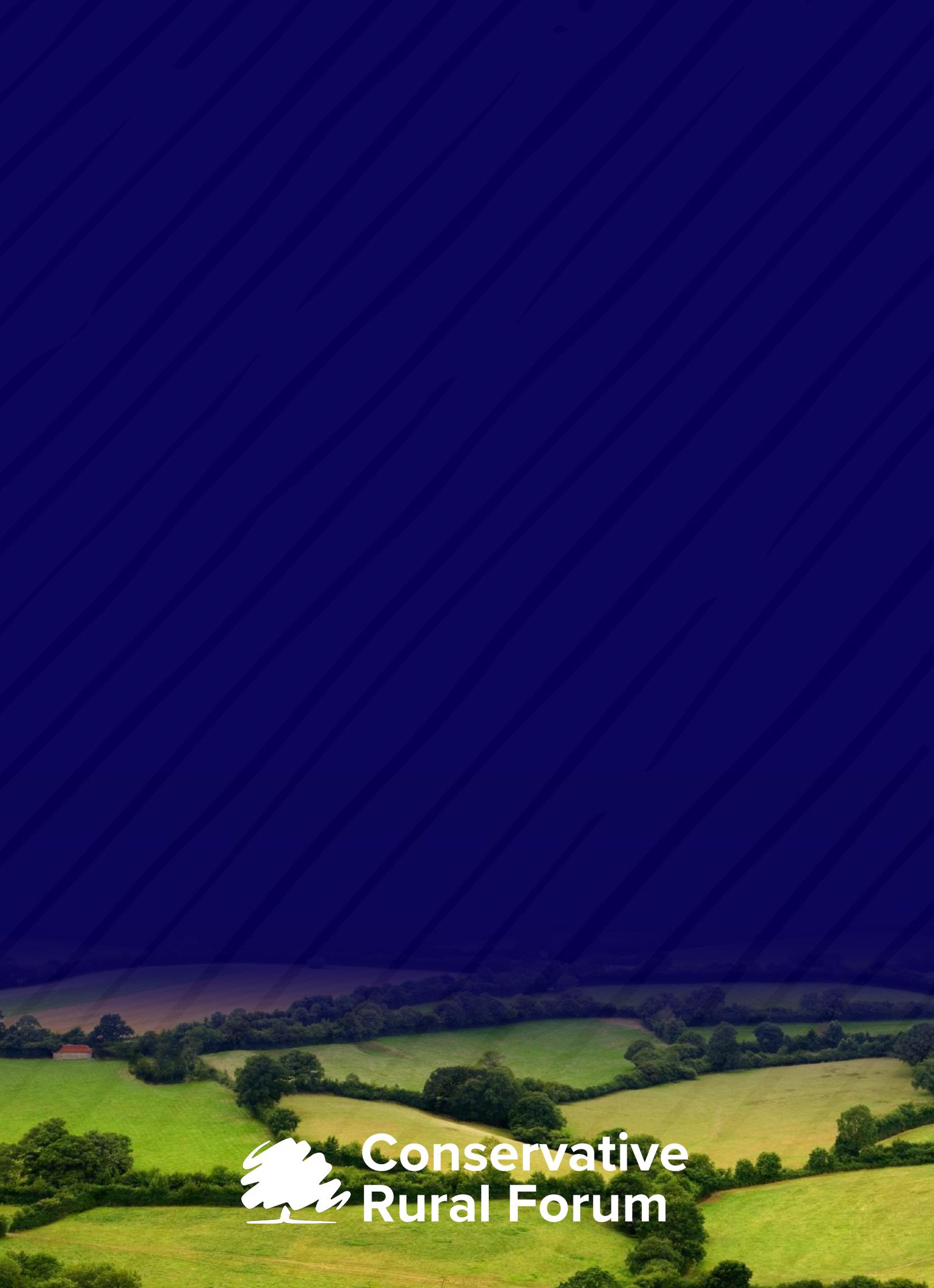
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