



Dairy Council

2027 Manifesto

A Pathway to Success



Our Asks

To deliver a **pathway to success** for the local dairy sector and agrifood supply chain to help meet growing global demand for milk and dairy produce. To achieve that, we need a coordinated legislative and policy environment across government departments which enables economic growth, and which allows family farms and local dairy processors to continue improving production levels sustainably and be supported by a skilled and data driven agrifoods sector.

We are asking for:

- Targeted DfE **capital grant funding** to allow processors to remain competitive
- A planning system which enables family farms to **plan for the future**
- Recognition of the role that the dairy sector plays in a **sustainable circular economy**
- A clear long-term **pathway to success** to give policy certainty and promote agrifood careers

About Us

DCNI acts on behalf of dairy farmers and processors and together we account for over 90% of the milk produced and processed in Northern Ireland. With a strong track record of producing quality, safe and nutritious dairy products – local dairy produce is valued and consumed in over 80 countries across the globe.

NI dairy exports account for over 43% of all local food and drink export sales outside the UK. In addition, over 800m litres of raw milk are sold to EU member states generating over £300m.

Our sector directly equates to:



Capital Grant Funding

Despite its importance to the local economy, Northern Ireland dairy processors receive significantly less capital grant funding than counterparts operating in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Dairy processors are constantly investing to drive productivity and Gross Value Added but such investments often run into tens of millions and in a landscape where we are competing for market share against global scale businesses we cannot afford to stand still.

The Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association's report 'Feeding the economy every day'¹ also outlined the enormous impact that dairy production and processing play in contributing to UK food security and the all-island economy.

Northern Ireland currently produces one 6th of UK milk, and with UK and Ireland populations forecast to grow by 2m by 2030 self-sufficiency and local production will become increasingly important in the years ahead.

Processors need to keep pace with their global competitors and meaningful support to invest in their facilities would help drive productivity, deliver efficiencies, improve GVA and contribute to increased regional balance as well as retaining a strong export market. Digital automation and AI will be key to business agility, productivity and transformation over the next decade

As stated by NIFDA, without investment "there is a risk that processing bottlenecks, rather than farm capability, become the limiting factor on growth."

We are calling on the Department for the Economy to provide direct capital grant support to the sector so its processing facilities can continue to make transformative investments that will drive prosperity, unlock wage growth and ensure it remains at the forefront of NI manufacturing.

Plan for the Future

The milk pool in Northern Ireland is the structural anchor for dairy processing businesses and whilst they need to sustain the volumes of milk currently being processed, there is also an opportunity to continue growing Northern Ireland's dairy output to meet increasing global demand.

The World Dairy Situation 2025 Bulletin of the International Dairy Federation indicates that global milk output is projected to grow by around 1.7% per year whilst global dairy consumption is expected to grow by around 1.9% annually so there is a realistic prospect of dairy demand not being met over the next decade.

To protect, sustain, and grow milk production, dairy farms need to be able to plan for the future, and that includes the ability to invest in infrastructure such as improved animal housing and slurry storage.

NIEA's consultation response times, uncertain policy direction, and the withdrawal of the operational protocol for ammonia emissions mean local farm businesses are assessed on a case-by-case basis. The lack of confidence in the planning system means farmers cannot reliably predict how their planning applications will be judged, slowing investment decisions and farm improvement plans.

Resolving this impasse would immediately allow dairy farms to:

- Raise animal health and welfare standards
- Protect soil quality, biodiversity and sensitive ecosystems
- Reduce ammonia emissions
- Improve storage capacity during adverse weather conditions
- Adopt more efficient, modern farming systems and improve feeding infrastructure

¹ <https://nifda.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/NIFDA-Economic-Impact-Study-FINAL-290426.pdf>

- Improve ventilation
- Improve nutrient recovery for participation in projects such as SuLS (sustainable utilisation of livestock slurry)
- Properly manage solids with the potential to create a new export market
- Improve food security

*The dairy sector in Northern Ireland is committed to working more sustainably to protect local habitats and improve air quality but we are being prevented from doing so by risk-averse planning and approval processes. We are calling on DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and NIEA to recognise the **benefits of betterment** and introduce a **revised operational protocol** which allows farm businesses to continue to invest and improve their enterprises.*

Sustainable Circular Economy

A core circular economy principle is maximising value from inputs while minimising waste and this is a major area where the dairy supply chain excels.

Processors

Local dairy processing facilities are already operating zero waste to landfill, using recycled and recyclable packaging, generating renewable gas and fertiliser from processing byproducts, and have made significant investments in energy efficiency and waste reduction technologies in recent years.

Farm liaison teams and CAFRE business development groups also help disseminate sustainability expertise, and processors have introduced sustainability payments to meet global-customer sustainability expectations and further reduce the sector's environmental impact.

On Farm

Farm businesses have long been investing in rainwater catchment, heat transfer cooling, and other energy efficiency programmes to improve the impact their farms have on the environment.

The highly successful soil nutrient health scheme, low emission slurry spreading, improved calving intervals, and data driven breeding practices have already had a significant impact on the sector's use of resources.

Did you know?

The carbon intensity of a litre of milk produced in Northern Ireland has **reduced by more than 40%** between 1990 and 2022.

Resolving planning issues would allow farms to play a more active role in renewable energy generation by making more slurry available as a feedstock for digestors. Many farm businesses have also started producing renewable electricity from biomass, solar and small-scale wind helping decarbonise rural communities and reduce reliance on imported fossil fuels.

*We are calling for the Department for the Economy, Department of Finance and DAERA to actively work together with Executive colleagues to adopt a strategic overview approach to sustainability that ensures the agrifood sector is rightfully included in future **strategies** and **support schemes** to ensure farmers and processors are properly recognised for the role they play in a sustainable circular economy. Furthermore, we want to see proper recognition for the work the sector has done to take a holistic approach to sustainability and consider the benefits being realised by rural communities by lowering energy costs, reducing waste and using resources more efficiently.*

Pathway to Success

For the dairy and wider agrifood sector to thrive in Northern Ireland, we need the incoming Executive to provide a coordinated, cohesive and interdepartmental pathway to success which:

- Attracts workers to dairy farming and **careers** in the wider supply chain
- Adopts **new technologies** to drive innovation and efficiencies
- Supports a policy environment that keeps agricultural **land for food production**

Dairy farming will continue to become a less attractive career opportunity until issues such as Nutrients Action Programming, Climate Action Planning, recognised accounting of farm level carbon mitigation, and significantly reducing the impact bovine TB are fully addressed in a more coherent and holistic fashion.

The reputation of the dairy sector is also reliant on the availability of clean, safe water, so we recognise the need to rectify decades of underinvestment.

Continued rhetoric around excess nutrients in Lough Neagh without decisive action being taken to address wastewater treatment shortcomings is also creating the impression that farmers are being treated unfairly, adding to existing workforce pressures and investment uncertainty.

The average farmer in Northern Ireland is 59, with 36% over 65, only 8% under 40, and around half of farmers currently having an identified successor.

DCNI research found the average farmer is working 66 hours per week, with 47% of labour carried out by the farmer, 27% by family members and 26% by employees. Workforce and skills shortages have contributed to an increase in the uptake of robotic milking, but this is not suitable for all farm systems or budgets.

We also need a processing sector and supply chain which can support farmers to farm more sustainably including advisors, food technologists, academics and researchers.

*To help provide a **pathway to success** for the local agrifood sector, we are asking the incoming Executive and Assembly to deliver:*

- *An overarching **agrifood masterplan** that gives better certainty on policy direction (or a 'what next') for the local dairy sector to attract young farmers and give them the confidence to invest in their business*
- ***Lower energy costs** for industry, which are more in line with GB and ROI to allow the sector to be competitive*
- *A targeted **export growth** programme to enable businesses to prepare for and capitalise on market opportunities in developing markets*
- *Retention of a key stakeholder group to provide guidance on the implementation of NAP and strategic input for the **co-design** of future NAP review processes*
- *On farm **innovation funding** to recognise and reward innovation and promote uptake across Northern Ireland through knowledge exchange and allow investment in robotics and other technologies where appropriate*
- ***Capital grant** funding to support productivity and value added (GVA) to allow processors to compete with GB and Irish counterparts*
- *Additional rollout of **agriculture qualifications** at GCSE and A Level*

- An **agrifood skills audit** to ensure Schools, Regional Colleges, CAFRE, AFB and Universities are producing the right skills to meet the sector's needs
- Continued investment in **succession planning** and support mechanisms for young farmers and new entrants
- A feasibility study on the potential to introduce a new **veterinary training school** in Northern Ireland to address the workforce shortfall and ageing workforce

Contact

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