



THE UPLANDS' POTENTIAL

Some of the attendees at the launch of *A Profile of Ireland's Uplands* at the Royal Irish Academy, Dawson Street, Dublin, in October

A new all-island, socio-economic profile of Ireland's upland areas, commissioned by the Irish Uplands Forum, highlights Ireland's upland areas as national assets and emphasises the need for policies that respond to upland strengths and challenges. **Helen Lawless** reports

A new report from the **Irish Uplands Forum**, *A Profile of Ireland's Uplands*, was officially launched in the Royal Irish Academy on Dawson Street, Dublin, at the end of October by **Virginia Teehan**, CEO of the Heritage Council.

The report gives an overview

of the status of Ireland's uplands across a broad range of indicators, providing a strong evidence base for policymakers to enhance our uplands as areas supporting vibrant communities.

This profile of Ireland's uplands is based on a townland-by-townland classification of Ireland's

uplands, using natural science criteria, including elevation and natural vegetation cover.

Through a series of maps, the report shows how land character and location are associated with a range of demographic and socio-economic features. For example, uplands along the western seaboard tend to

have older populations and are structurally weaker, demographically and economically.

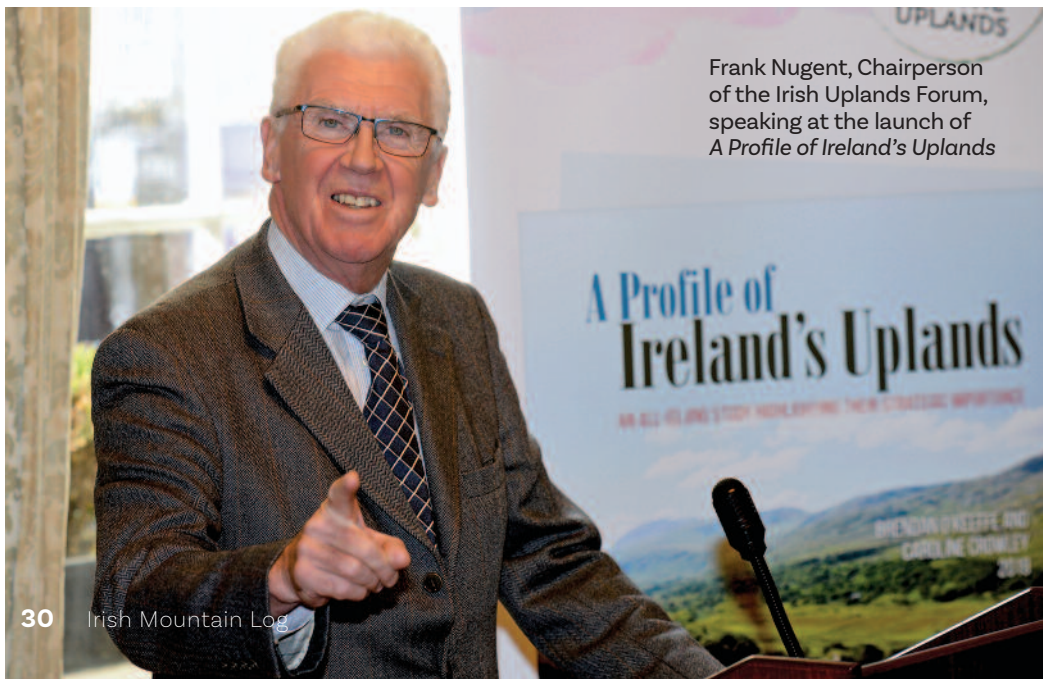
The report illustrates the inter-dependencies between upland areas and lowland populations, including the increasing appeal of the uplands as spaces for recreation.

Not surprisingly, it shows that those upland areas which are better connected with urban centres have a stronger demographic profile and greater economic activity.

Uplands in Northern Ireland emerge as being more dynamic and vibrant than those in the Republic. Looking at the socio-economic characteristics of your favourite upland areas will give you a different perspective on the places where you walk and climb.

Vital public goods

A picture of changing land management practices



Frank Nugent, Chairperson of the Irish Uplands Forum, speaking at the launch of *A Profile of Ireland's Uplands*

emerges from the profile. There has been a decline in the number of people farming, an expansion of pastureland at the expense of natural vegetation, an increase in commercial afforestation and new industrial uses such as wind-farm development.

Undeveloped land is seen by some people as a waste, or not having value, whereas in fact these areas provide significant benefits to society that are not associated with intensively farmed land.

Land in Ireland's upland areas is, in the main, privately owned, either individually or jointly. Yet our uplands are a significant national asset, and investment in sustaining them is in our collective interest.

A strong theme in the report is the potential for more sustainable management of upland areas to enhance the provision of public goods, such as water supply, flood attenuation, carbon storage, biodiversity and recreation opportunities, for the benefit of all of our population.

There could be a new, valuable role for upland farmers in improving the ability of Ireland's uplands to deliver these vital ecological services. This model would play to the natural strengths of our upland areas, but it requires a major



Pictured at the launch of the report in the Royal Irish Academy (from left): Caroline Crowley (researcher); Brendan O'Keeffe (researcher); Helen Lawless (Mountaineering Ireland); Jim Sheehan (Mountaineering Ireland & Wicklow Uplands Council (WUC)); Frank Nugent (Irish Uplands Forum); Virginia Teehan (Heritage Council); Louis O'Byrne (WUC); Tom Byrne (WUC); Brian Dunne (WUC); and John Medlycott (WUC).

policy shift.

The report notes that hill farms are more dependent on **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** payments for the provision of public goods than are other farms, yet the payments associated with the provision of public goods represent a shrinking proportion of farm subsidies.

The next round of CAP, due to start in 2021, offers a timely opportunity to better align agricultural policy with public-good imperatives in other areas, notably in ameliorating climate change and arresting biodiversity loss.

Investment needed

Currently there is no national policy for Ireland's uplands; the focus remains sectoral across many areas, including agriculture, environment, planning, recreation and tourism.

The report calls for an integrated policy approach to the uplands, including a programme of support for upland partnership groups.

The **Wicklow Uplands Council (WUC)**, frequently held up as a leading exponent of this partnership model, would not still be in existence were it not for the modest core

Hill farmers could have a valuable new role in improving the ability of upland areas to deliver ecological services.

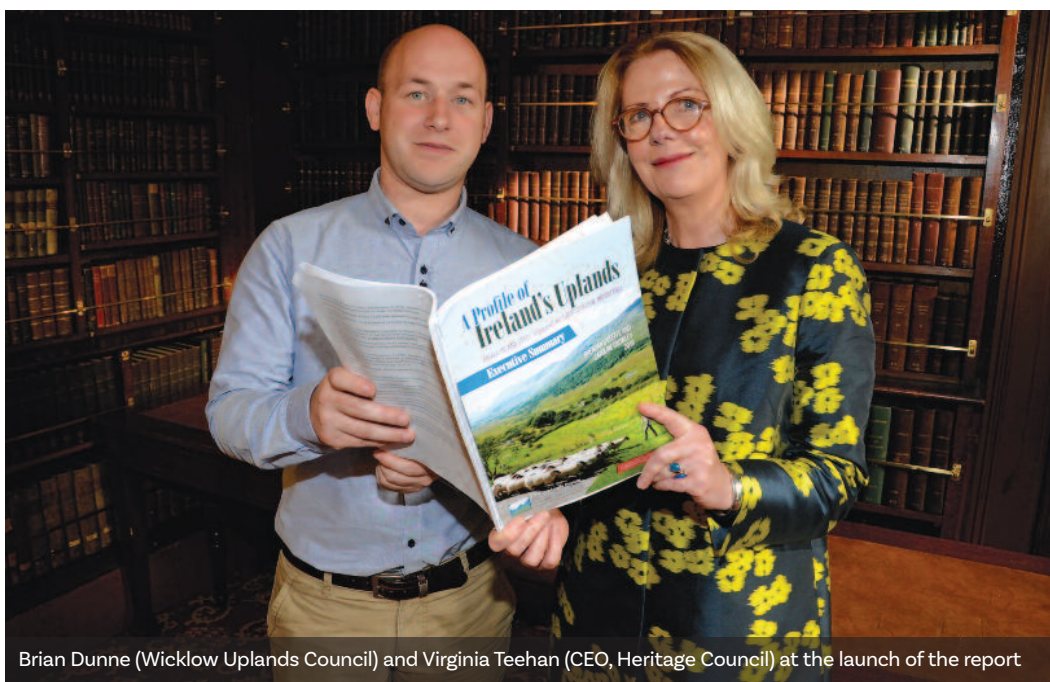
funding it has received from the **Heritage Council** over the past twenty years.

In a statement welcoming the report, Mountaineering Ireland highlighted the need to invest in looking after Ireland's upland areas so that these important areas can continue to provide benefits for all of society.

The investment needs range, from managing the impact of increased recreation activity in upland areas to supporting hill farmers to manage their land in a way that improves the delivery of ecosystem services.

Mountaineering Ireland also called on the Irish Uplands Forum to bring together a coalition of interests in the uplands to agree the specific policy measures that are needed.

FIND OUT MORE A Profile of Ireland's Uplands was written by Brendan O'Keeffe and Caroline Crowley. The report, produced with funding assistance from the Heritage Council, can be downloaded freely from the Irish Upland Forum's website at [bit.ly/irishuplands](https://irishuplands.org/publications) or at <https://irishuplandsforum.org/publications>



Brian Dunne (Wicklow Uplands Council) and Virginia Teehan (CEO, Heritage Council) at the launch of the report